

‘Being in the World of School’

**A Phenomenological Exploration of Experiences
for Gifted and Talented Adolescents**

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Dedication

PhD or not, I will always aspire to be just like the intelligent, life-long learner I know as my mother. I can still discuss, debate (and not always agree) with this wonderful woman who continues to give sound advice to me, and the rest of her family, at 87 years young. Her support and love throughout this process has been invaluable.

I dedicate this thesis to my mother

June Valmai Black

Abstract

This thesis explores the experiences of school for gifted and talented adolescents in New Zealand. The foci of inquiry are a) what it is like to be gifted and talented in a New Zealand schooling context, and b) the understandings of a group of students, their parents and teachers, about the achievement and underachievement of gifted learners. The research relates specifically to a group of 11 gifted and talented students, their experiences and ideas about what it means to be gifted and talented and to achieve as gifted and talented learners.

Adopting a qualitative, phenomenological methodology, the voices of the students were prioritised in the research process and thesis writing. Semi-structured interviews are the main source of data. Multiple interviews were conducted with the adolescent participants over a period of 18 months, within their first two years of secondary schooling, and with their parents and teachers. Written reflections by the students provide supplementary data.

The thesis explores and problematises understandings of achievement and underachievement that are presented in literature and were held by the research participants. The implications of these understandings on the decisions that gifted adolescents make, about what constitutes achievement and whether and how they seek to achieve in school, are highlighted.

The essences of the lived schooling experiences for the gifted and talented adolescents in this study are drawn together and summarised in three main themes. The first theme relates to culture and context and how this influenced the students' understandings about what it meant to be gifted and talented within the particular socio-cultural milieu of a New Zealand school. The participants showed an understanding of the preferred New Zealand values of modesty and the downplaying of any perceived advantages. The second theme relates to the concept of 'potential' as an enigma and a nebulous term that is assumed to mean different and particular things for gifted and talented learners. It is argued that it is not theoretically sound to structure definitions of underachievement for gifted learners around the idea of 'not reaching your potential.' The third theme relates to the negotiation of adolescent identities. Being

gifted and talented added to the complexities around identity development for the students who participated in the study, as they worked to find their fit within the socio-cultural context of a New Zealand school. Four different identity profiles are developed to provide an illustration of the variation and complexity of gifted and talented students' identity negotiations.

There is little research literature that centres on the lived experiences of gifted students within New Zealand society. This study seeks to address this gap. The research and theorising from this thesis will add to the growing research base in New Zealand on educating gifted and talented learners. Readers of the thesis, who may include a range of education professionals, are invited to draw implications from the study about the experiences and achievement of gifted adolescents and relate the findings to their knowledge and understanding of gifted and talented learners, within their own work situations and cultural contexts.

Chapter One:

Introducing the Study: A Personal Passion

This study investigates what it is like to be a gifted and talented adolescent experiencing the world of school. It is born from both my personal and professional experiences: personal in that as a parent I was involved with the lived experiences of my daughter's schooling life as a gifted and talented learner, and professional in my role as a teacher and teacher educator in gifted and talented education. It was these experiences that led me to place at the heart of this study the 11 adolescents who over a period of 18 months shared with me their thoughts and understandings about being gifted and talented learners and experiencing school in Aotearoa New Zealand (New Zealand). I have chosen to begin my study with the words of one of these students.

Autumn Ashes (all names are pseudonyms) recounted her contrasting experiences as a highly able student, firstly at a primary school in a rural town of New Zealand and then as a Year 10 (age 14) student in a large urban high school.

I suppose they were maybe jealous that I could do that and they couldn't. And so they picked on me. But it started with like two and then everyone else just kinda – even my friends kind of did it, but not in a joking way, like, kind of like, “oh yeah, Autumn the dictionary,” but not just joking anymore. Yeah I was always called a nerd at – all through primary school and then as I say, going on the bus back to R, they still used to call me like “nerdy Autumn” or “Autumn, the Walking Dictionary” and stuff, which is why I didn't like taking the bus cos I thought it was horrible in Year Seven. I thought they were just all picking on me.

Nerd. But I actually don't mind being called a nerd because nerds are very cool. Like being uncool is amazing and cool in my world anyway and yeah.

What had changed for this gifted and talented young person so that she now embraced her status as a “nerd” in her “world” and positioned herself as “cool,” despite her history of unhappiness in previous schooling experiences as a highly able student? How might experiences of school affect the decisions that a young girl like Autumn makes about achieving, or not achieving, as a gifted and talented learner? What can

we, as educators, learn from the voices of the students themselves about their lived experiences of being gifted and talented as adolescents in the socio-cultural milieu of New Zealand schools?

This thesis is about Autumn and ten adolescents who are experiencing school as gifted and talented learners in New Zealand. It is about learning from their stories to get a better understanding of how educators can make the world of school a positive, caring and successful world for the myriad of gifted and talented young people within that schooling environment.

Rationale and context of the study – the beginning

The starting point for this study was my desire to contribute, through research, to the field of education in which I had been involved for many years. Over time, I had become cognisant that there was very little published empirical New Zealand-based research in gifted and talented education. This view was supported by the conclusions from a report commissioned by the New Zealand Ministry of Education (MOE) (Riley, Bevan-Brown, Bicknell, Carroll-Lind, & Kearney, 2004) that looked at the effectiveness of provisions for gifted and talented students in New Zealand. From their extensive literature review, the authors found that there was a lack of New Zealand-based research and cautioned that care needed to be taken in drawing conclusions from international research that may not be appropriate when looked at within the New Zealand culture and context. The majority of evidence-based research that educators and policy makers had at their disposal, and that was consequently used to support policy and practice in New Zealand schools, was from the United States, Britain and Australia. The researchers concluded that:

There is a dearth of New Zealand-based research which measures the effectiveness of identification and provisions for gifted and talented students and which measures social, emotional, cultural, intellectual, or creative outcomes. (Riley et al., 2004, p. 277)

I was interested, therefore, in conducting research that would find out more about the culture and context of giftedness and talent for New Zealand gifted and talented learners within New Zealand schools.

Another finding from the same MOE report was that on-going professional development for teachers is of the utmost importance for ensuring positive outcomes for gifted and talented students in New Zealand schools. Riley et al. (2004) have reminded us that “the effectiveness of any approach to identification or provision ... rests in the hands of the teachers who are implementing it” (p. 279). However, in 2008, the Education Review Office (ERO) released a report which did not paint a positive picture of practice in New Zealand schools. Among the key findings were that the majority of schools “were not able to demonstrate achievement and progress for many gifted and talented students” and “did not recognise the special social and emotional needs of gifted and talented students” (p. 46). A further disturbing conclusion was that for about half of the schools that ERO visited, gifted and talented students reported that they were bored or not interested in school. The programmes offered were not working for them, and many were not being recognised as having needs because the identification procedures in their schools were not adequate. In fact, ERO found definition and identification processes to be inclusive and appropriate in only 5% of the schools reviewed. It could be concluded from the findings of this report that many teachers in New Zealand schools lacked the understandings or the professional knowledge around how to work towards positive outcomes for their gifted and talented students. All this suggested to me that there was a need to find out more about gifted and talented students’ experiences in schools.

Narrowing the focus

In searching for a focus for my research study, my initial thought was to investigate the phenomenon of underachievement for gifted and talented students. This came about from my discussions with colleagues in the field, from my readings in gifted education and from my observations of gifted and talented students that I had known. I had noted a general consensus in the research literature that academic underachievement among gifted learners was omnipresent and was of major concern to teachers and parents (Colangelo, Kerr, Christensen, & Maxey, 1993; Emerick, 1992; Figg, Rogers, McCormick, & Low, 2012; Reis & McCoach, 2000; Vialle, Heaven, & Ciarrochi, 2007).

Adults were obviously troubled about underachievement, but I wondered how serious an issue it might be for the gifted and talented learners themselves? This wondering

crystallised into a possible research topic when I listened to a talk by a young gifted and talented man at a conference in Adelaide, Australia, for educators involved in gifted education. It illustrated for me the value of lived experiences for research purposes. The young man was awkward and shy in his presentation, and told us he had only been persuaded to talk to us by a much respected former high school teacher. He had excelled academically at a selective high school for the gifted in Australia, won scholarships to a top ranked university where he had continued to achieve top grades, and was apparently destined to go on to a stellar academic career. However, after one year at university he had chosen to drop out and was now working as a tile maker, designing and making decorative tiles. In the eyes of his parents, some high school teachers, university lecturers and his peers, he was a ‘gifted underachiever.’ But to us, he said, “I am the happiest I have ever been in my life.” In his eyes, he was not underachieving but following a different pathway in a talent area of his own choice.

I began to feel that there were important questions that needed to be explored around the “educational enigma” (Hoover-Schultz, 2005, p. 46) that was ‘gifted underachievement.’ What did gifted and talented learners understand underachievement to be? Were their understandings the same as those of their parents and teachers? How important were concerns about underachievement for the gifted and talented students themselves? Robertson (2003) suggests it could be that some of these students are “not particularly concerned about their underachievement except for the fact that it may make their parents and other significant people unhappy” (p. 3). Because my original desire was to investigate the experiences of gifted students within a New Zealand cultural context, I wondered, particularly, what young gifted and talented adolescents in New Zealand schools understood underachievement to mean. Thus, understandings about underachievement for gifted and talented students became the initial phenomenon of interest for my doctoral study.

I also realised that my wonderings about the beliefs and perceptions of these young New Zealand adolescents invited exploration of their lived schooling experiences. Cross (2001) supports placing gifted and talented learners as the experts about their own experiences. He suggests that this “is one of the richest areas in the field of gifted education in which to conduct research,” and further that “we are far from

understanding the relationship between the experiences of gifted students, how they make sense of these experiences, and how these experiences affect gifted students' behaviours in school" (p. 43).

Dillon (2011a), too, advocates for increased research attention on student experience. She notes that the gifted education field still has a long way to go in terms of qualitative research that explores the everyday reality and self-understandings of gifted young people, maintaining that "as a result, close up and nuanced accounts of the ways individual gifted young persons relate to themselves and their worlds may be missing from our catalogues of expert knowledge" (p. 29).

Such views strengthened my rationale to conduct the study in a way that would privilege the experiences and voices of the adolescents who were to be my participants. I understood as a parent and as an educator that gifted and talented learners are a heterogeneous group of individuals who have diverse schooling experiences. However, despite my many years of being immersed in gifted education, I had not experienced being in the world of school myself as a gifted and talented learner. Nor could I. Thus, it was these kinds of experiences that I wanted to explore and interpret, and the question of what it was really like experiencing school as a gifted and talented learner came to be at the forefront of my thinking for the thesis. By paying attention to the voices of a group of young gifted and talented adolescents, this study attempts to put the diverse experiences of these learners within the particular cultures of their schools in New Zealand at the centre of its understandings.

In 2005, New Zealand researcher Keen (2005) concluded that any research, "at this stage of the development of gifted education in New Zealand, inevitably raises questions rather than providing answers" (p. 216). For this reason, I approached my study with a desire to pose more questions. However, I also had ideas about the way in which I wanted to go about the study. I did not see the focus of my study as being about a problem that needed to be solved, but as one that would explore the meaning and significance behind certain phenomena and particular lived experiences (van Manen, 1990). In this way, I hoped to contribute to a greater understanding about the needs of gifted and talented learners in New Zealand.

In order to help make sense of the lived experiences of these adolescent gifted and talented learners I chose a qualitative, phenomenological framework for the study. The phenomenological emphasis is on the search for meaning and on the way we illuminate our everyday experiences as we live them. Phenomenological research is particularly concerned with the socio-cultural and historical traditions that influence our ways of living as we grow and develop (van Manen, 1990). This approach fitted with the rationale behind the study. The phenomenological methodology and the case study strategy of inquiry chosen for the study are discussed fully in Chapter Three.

To further locate this study within a specific context, I needed to make decisions about the group of gifted and talented learners from New Zealand schools who would comprise my participants for the study. I wanted to investigate a variety of schooling experiences for the participants, so a retrospective view was preferred, and I felt that students who had been at school through primary school and were beginning secondary school as developing adolescents would fill this aim. In addition, I had an interest in the development of adolescent identities and wondered how these might play out for gifted and talented young people. Practically, I had a relationship with a local intermediate school (for students from ages 11–13) which made it easier for me to access adolescents as participants for the study. In addition, it appeared that there was a need for more research that focuses on gifted and talented adolescents.

According to Vialle and her colleagues:

The specific issues for gifted adolescents have not been fully explored in the literature, because most research on giftedness has focused on younger children. Without undermining the importance of the research on gifted children, there is a need to expand our understandings of the particular experiences of gifted adolescents as it is another critical developmental point in the translation of gifted potential into performance or talent. (Vialle et al., 2007, p. 570)

I intend this study to add to the growing research base developing around the experiences of gifted and talented adolescents.

Moving towards the research questions

Gifted and talented students in New Zealand schools

Schools in New Zealand are tasked with catering for a diverse group of learners who represent a broad range of abilities, interests and motivations. All students in New Zealand's schools have the right to be supported to develop their individual abilities (Ministry of Education, 2012b). The focus of this thesis is on a particular group of learners: gifted and talented learners. The MOE suggests that these learners are likely to be present in every New Zealand school. This is evidenced by policy documents in which the Ministry states that gifted and talented students are those who "demonstrate exceptionality in relation to their peers of the same age, culture, or circumstances," and that these students are found "in all societal groups, regardless of culture, ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, or disability (learning, physical, or behavioural)" (Ministry of Education, 2012a, p. 22). Rogers (2002) concurs with this "truism" of the description of giftedness and talent when she notes that "gifts and talents come to individuals across both sexes, all races and ethnic groups, all religious groups and all socio-economic levels. Children with gifts and talent come in all shapes and sizes" (p. 26). Thus, the study is delineated according to the premise that its findings could have implications for a large and heterogeneous group of young people who are experiencing schooling in New Zealand.

The adolescents in this study are most commonly referred to throughout the thesis as gifted and talented learners. Most writers choose to link giftedness and talent together as one concept (Moltzen, 2011a). This thesis adheres to this practice, predominantly using the term 'gifted and talented.' This is the terminology adopted by the MOE in their policy documents (Ministry of Education, 2012a, n.d.) and in a popular edited book in New Zealand on gifted and talented education (Moltzen, 2011d). In addition, where 'giftedness' is used as a phrase in this study, it should be taken to mean the same as 'giftedness and talent.' It was not the aim of the thesis to debate the differences between the two terms, although Chapter Two gives an explanation around the development of conceptualisations of giftedness and talent. The term 'highly able' is also used in the thesis, and this is seen as synonymous with 'gifted and talented' or 'gifted' when describing the participants. Chapter Four provides a

more in-depth description of the characteristics of the gifted and talented adolescents who were the focus of this study.

Re-thinking the phenomena of interest

This thesis has as its main focus an exploration of the understandings of the phenomena of achievement and underachievement for gifted and talented learners. Although the original research focus was on exploring the understandings that gifted and talented students – and their parents and teachers – had about the phenomenon of underachievement, as the research progressed I began to see the phenomenon as being one part of a continuum of the whole concept of achievement. An entry in my research journal reflected this thinking:

Having listened to some student interviews and the two teacher interviews [*the teachers from Skye school*] I am beginning to think that more of a focus of my study might be understandings about underachievement and achievement [*original underlining from journal*]. Some very interesting responses from the students about what achievement means to them – need to look at the literature around this and structure future interviews to get more on this. (Research journal, 11/06/08)

Moreover, I was coming to realise that it would be difficult for participants to construct understandings about the phenomenon of underachievement without having firstly reflected on their understandings of achievement.

A further concern that developed through my reading was that by focusing solely on underachievement, I was perhaps already assuming a deficit approach towards this phenomenon. In the literature, there was support for a move away from focusing on underachievement as a problem and from seeing the child as being at fault (Delisle, 1994, 2006; Delisle & Berger, 1990; Robertson, 2003). Therefore, early on in the research process, at the stage of the initial interviews with the students, I made the decision to re-think the phenomenon of interest and to focus on what the participants thought about both achievement and underachievement for gifted and talented learners.

This resolve to focus on an exploration of the understandings of the participants about achievement and underachievement was supported by my search of the extensive

literature on gifted underachievement. Much of the literature has looked at the enigma surrounding the definition (Reis & McCoach, 2000). This remains a complex phenomenon which continues to stir debate among researchers (Balduf, 2009; Colangelo et al., 1993; Figg et al., 2012). Most definitions in the literature describe underachievement as a discrepancy between ability and achievement, but there is disagreement about what is actually meant by ability and in particular about how it is measured (Reis & McCoach, 2000). The arguments presented around the difficulties of defining the phenomenon are those conceptualised by the researchers. There do not appear to have been studies that asked gifted and talented students themselves, or their parents, or teachers, what they believed the concept of underachievement – or for that matter, achievement – to be about.

Most studies looking at underachievement in gifted and talented learners have compared achievers and underachievers using quantitative methods. There has been a growing trend in the international literature in recent years (Peterson, Duncan, & Canady, 2009) towards studies that aim to explore the life experiences of achieving and underachieving gifted students and listen to their views. In the review for the background to this thesis, I was able to find only two published studies that focused on the lived experiences of gifted and talented students within the socio-cultural environment of New Zealand schools. Keen (2005) conducted a longitudinal study from 2001–2003, part of which included case studies of gifted and talented students in New Zealand schools in which they were asked about schooling life. A small-scale study comparing accelerated and non-accelerated gifted and talented students investigated the students' feelings about being gifted and whether this led to any stresses for them (Kirby & Townsend, 2001). There were no empirical studies found which asked gifted and talented learners in New Zealand schools their understandings about achievement or underachievement. Thus, the focus for my study became the lived experiences of gifted and talented students who were experiencing school in New Zealand – their understandings about achievement and underachievement, and the understandings of their parents and teachers.

I wanted to collect data that would lead to an exploration of the understandings that gifted and talented adolescents had about their experiences of schooling in New

Zealand. With this in mind, I constructed the following two research questions for the study.

- What is it like to be gifted and talented in the socio-cultural milieu of the New Zealand school?
- What are the understandings that gifted and talented students, their parents and their teachers have about the achievement and underachievement of gifted learners?

A personal perspective – declaring my position

The research undertaken was based, inevitably, on personal interest and passion. As van Manen (1990) points out, “The problem of phenomenological inquiry is not always that we know too little about the phenomenon we wish to investigate, but that we know too much” (p. 46). He recommends that as a researcher, you should start with what is really interesting to you and consider your “orientation to the lifeworld” (p. 41). My orientation to my research topic was both personal, as a parent, and pedagogical, as an educator of both parents and teachers. Denzin and Lincoln (2005a), though not specifically referring to the phenomenological method, concur with the idea that a researcher brings a personal orientation to any study when they noted that “the interpretative bricoleur understands that research is an interactive process shaped by his or her own personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity, and by those of the people in the setting” (p. 6). By choosing to focus my study around lived schooling experiences of gifted and talented students, I was inevitably invoking my personal history, as well as the assumptions and pre-conceptions which have evolved from this history, and thus any possible interpretations were viewed through these prior experiences.

Guba and Lincoln (2005) use the term “passionate participant” (p.194) for someone who chooses to conduct research under a constructivist voice, and this also resonated with me as I began the research study. I have been passionate about the field of gifted and talented education since being intimately involved in the early experiences of my eldest daughter as she began to learn what it was like “growing up gifted” (Clark, 2002, p. 167) within the socio-cultural milieu of New Zealand schools. A brief

personal history, which places me within the context of this study as a “passionate participant,” is presented below.

Olivia¹ is the eldest of our three children. She was an early developer, both verbally and physically, walking at 10 months of age and speaking first sentences clearly at around 13 months. She showed a complex vocabulary for her age, an advanced curiosity and superior memory skills. I have an early memory of her climbing the stairs at a friend’s place and carefully counting each step up to 20, missing out only number 14. She was 20 months old. Friends and family commented on her difference from other pre-schoolers. Her precocious language skills in particular set her apart from her peers. At six years old, Olivia was assessed by a psychologist as gifted.

Her primary school was a small country school of around 80 pupils, and this was a positive experience for the first six months. However, it wasn’t long before she became known by peers and teachers as a very different young girl. Her peers perceived her as ‘odd,’ and she soon became positioned at school as an ‘other.’ Thus, there began for me many years of advocating for Olivia’s needs, academically, socially and emotionally, as she negotiated her schooling life within an environment in which she never quite seemed to find her place. Olivia herself was aware of her difference, as her own words show:

I had known for a while now that I was gifted and it didn’t really mean that much to me. I mean, sure, I was proud but it didn’t change my life or anything. Until now. Because people were starting to realise that I was different. No one wanted to play with me anymore. Everyone teased me, not just a few boys. (Olivia, aged 9, personal writings)

Olivia found that if she was successful at school events such as speech and poetry competitions or school tests, she would be mocked by her peers, and if she did not win she would be laughed at for “coming second” or told that she was “not as smart as she thought she was.” As more overt bullying became apparent, she became at times a very unhappy young girl who had sustained periods of refusing to go to school. In discussions with the school, we decided to accelerate Olivia one year in an effort to provide academic challenges. This did help to a certain extent, but socially things seemed to go from bad to worse for her at the small rural school, so we moved her to

¹ Olivia’s story and her views as a young girl are presented in this thesis with her understanding and permission.

a larger intermediate school at Year 7 in the hope of a fresh start. Her experiences at the intermediate school and, following this, her high school were marginally better than those at her primary school. She maintained a high level of achievement across academic subjects and in several extra-curricular areas throughout her schooling, but as she herself noted, “I can see that it was the friends problem which caused all the trouble.” She acknowledged her difficulties with social relationships. At the latter two schools, despite having teachers who had some understanding of the needs of gifted and talented students and who supported her with some form of pastoral care, the social issues persisted. Things did not improve greatly until her final two years of high school, when she found a group of girls who also found comfort within what they themselves termed the “weird group.”

As a result of my supporting and advocating for Olivia’s needs as a gifted learner, I became active in parent support groups both locally and nationally, and I was eventually offered a position as an extension studies teacher at a local primary school in 1996. Since that time, I have been involved in various initiatives in the field of gifted and talented education, including setting up a cluster programme for rural primary schools, co-founding a local parent support group for families, organising national conferences and co-founding The New Zealand National Professional Association for Gifted Education (giftEDnz). In addition, I have taught parent education courses in the area of gifted education, taught pre- and post-service teacher education courses in gifted and talented education, acted as a consultant to teachers and schools, and presented at conferences both nationally and internationally. In the last 15 years, I have spent hundreds of hours on the phone talking to parents – and sometimes teachers – about issues concerning their gifted and talented children.

In my position as a phenomenological researcher, I brought my own lived experience to this study. I have observed, contributed to and shared in the life of my daughter and her experiences of schooling in New Zealand. I have made certain interpretations about these particular lived experiences, as a key support person in her life. I have interpreted and analysed events in her life in an attempt to make sense of what it was like for her growing up gifted and talented. I have been involved in the field of gifted and talented education professionally. The existential focus I brought with me to this study needed to be made explicit, since any knowledge, assumptions and

understandings that I had could not be put aside completely. Bracketing, which is a form of suspending one's beliefs about a phenomenon of interest, is recommended by phenomenologists such as Husserl (van Manen, 1990), but others (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) maintain that one cannot help but look at any new phenomenon being brought to light without the interpretation being founded on Heidegger's concept of "fore-conceptions" (p. 25). At the beginning of the research process, I acknowledged my pre-learnings and the influences they might have on the way in which I conducted the research. However, I was also aware of the need to bracket some of these pre-understandings in my relational experiences with the participants.

Thesis outline

The thesis is composed of seven chapters.

The first chapter introduces the reader to the rationale for the study and the context within which the research was carried out. The wonderings that led to the focus for the research are outlined and the process of moving towards the research questions is explained. Adhering to a phenomenological approach, my personal background and pre-understandings as a researcher are declared.

Chapter Two explores the literature in order to provide context and background to the study. This background chapter is structured in two parts. The first is about conceptualisations of giftedness and talent, and the second is about achievement and underachievement for gifted and talented students. The chapter gives an outline of historical developments about how giftedness has been defined, followed by an exploration of some current trends in the literature around conceptualising giftedness and talent. Consideration is given to New Zealand conceptualisations of giftedness and how these have developed within a socio-cultural framework. Debates in the literature around definitions of underachievement for gifted and talented learners are discussed, emphasising the difficulties that exist in understanding exactly what the phenomenon means. Particular attention is given to any studies carried out in New Zealand that look at the phenomena of achievement and underachievement.

In Chapter Three, my understandings about the overarching methodology for the thesis are presented. I discuss the world view that I hold and that gives shape to the

philosophical and theoretical influences that have guided the study. This methodology chapter delineates why a phenomenological, qualitative research approach suited my study. The strategies of inquiry that were chosen and their fit under the overarching methodology are explained. I outline the way I went about finding my participants. This is followed by a summary of the tools of inquiry used in the collection of data and an explanation of how I collected the data. I make clear the ethical process I went through and reflect on the interview process in relation to some ethical issues. I also reflect on the ways in which my relationship with the participants developed over the 18 month data collection period. The chapter concludes with a description of the process of the analysis of the data that I undertook and a discussion of my thoughts about ensuring trustworthiness in a study such as this one.

The fourth chapter is the first of the Findings chapters. I introduce profiles of the 11 adolescents who were at the 'heart' of my study. This chapter looks at the understandings that the students, their parents and their teachers had about achievement and underachievement, in response to the research question. The chapter is structured into exploring the understandings for each of the three participant groups around meaning units (Moustakas, 1994) that arose from the data. The understandings are looked at in terms of similarities of meaning units for participants, but some differing, unique views are also presented. Understandings across the three groups are also explored.

The second Findings chapter is an exploration of the interpretations that came from the data about what it was like for these gifted and talented adolescents experiencing school in the socio-cultural milieu of a New Zealand school. In line with a phenomenological framework, a rich description of the lived experiences of the young people who took part in this study is the aim of Chapter Five. This description is organised under the major super-ordinate theme (Smith et al., 2009) of 'Being in the World of School,' while sub-themes of 'Being Gifted and Talented,' 'Being a High Achiever' and 'Finding a Fit' are also presented.

Chapter Six, the final Findings chapter, focuses on the phenomenological idea of 'essence.' It weaves together the ideas from the previous two chapters into three key themes that have emerged as representing the essences of the understandings for the participants in relation to the two research questions. As I explore these notions, some

of the commonly held ideas about the experiences of gifted and talented students in schools are drawn into question. Gifted and Talented Adolescent Identity Profiles developed from the combined narratives of the young participants in this study are introduced for consideration. A series of propositions for educators are included at the conclusion of this chapter.

Issues of thoughtfulness are presented in Chapter Seven. These may help teachers, educators and policy makers re-think policy, practice and pedagogy as they work to provide for and support gifted and talented students in New Zealand schools. The concluding chapter also looks at the understandings that I, as the researcher, have gained as a result of conducting this study and at some ideas for further study about the experiences of gifted and talented students in New Zealand schools. The chapter reflects on the methodological decisions I made and on some of the limitations of the study.

I now share with the reader the stories of the lived experiences of April, Astrid, Autumn Ashes, Bruce Wayne, Hubert Cumberlande, Kurt, Lewis, Marty, Mr Bubbles, Oliver Stone and Rambo.

Chapter Two:

Background to the Study:

What Does the Literature Say?

Any discussion of issues relating to underachievement in gifted students must carefully define both the constructs of giftedness and underachievement. (Reis & McCoach, 2000, p. 152)

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide background about the complexities of definitions relating to both the concept of giftedness and the phenomena of achievement, particularly that of underachievement for gifted and talented students. Despite a wealth of research exploring definitions of giftedness and talent and looking at underachievement, both these areas are subject to continuing debate among those writing in the field.

The chapter is divided into two parts. The first part begins by exploring the historical influences that have impacted on current perspectives of giftedness and then provides a summary of current trends in international views of giftedness and talent. These trends are then juxtaposed against the New Zealand cultural scene with a review of the development of New Zealand conceptions of giftedness, through the limited literature that exists from this country. The second part of the chapter reports on the literature that was found about achievement and underachievement for gifted and talented students. The varying arguments around how to define the phenomenon of underachievement, which are extensively researched in the literature, are discussed, along with the nature of research studies which have attempted to explore the experiences of achievement and underachievement for gifted and talented students.

Part One: About giftedness

As even the most cursory glance at the literature of the field of gifted education reveals, there is, to understate the situation considerably, no consensus as to what this construct, giftedness, is, how it reveals itself, or what it is composed of. (Borland, 2008, p. 262)

Debates about definitions around giftedness and talent are present in a range of empirical and theoretical literature. Nevertheless, as Borland (2008) has pointed out, despite the plethora of theories that have been espoused in the past and the fact that conceptions have changed significantly since early interest, there remains no universal definition of the construct of giftedness (Borland, 2008; Dai, 2010; Davis & Rimm, 2004; Schroth & Heifer, 2009). However, an understanding of how giftedness is conceptualised is important for educators and families as they advocate for the needs of these children educationally, emotionally and socially (Phillipson, 2007). This unwillingness to accept any absolute, universal meaning is problematic for the field and consequently requires that any definition of giftedness used for the purposes of research needs to be justified at the outset. In addition, Miller (2008) has maintained that a comprehensible conception of giftedness has important relevance for pedagogy, as it is around this conception that curricula, teaching practices and programming will be based.

An overview of the conceptualisation of giftedness

Societies have been fascinated throughout history with those among them who perform at exceptional levels (Robinson & Clinkenbeard, 2008; Ziegler & Heller, 2000). However, the epistemological ideas around the concept of giftedness have changed considerably over time. The influence of these past conceptions continues to impact on the way giftedness and talent are viewed today, and thus it is relevant to summarise the historical development of giftedness in this thesis.

Egalitarianism versus excellence

Earliest ideas about giftedness linked the concept strongly to religion. During the epochs of the Ancient Greeks and Romans, it was believed that talented individuals must have been touched by the gods (Robinson & Clinkenbeard, 2008). ‘Heavenly children’ was a term used by both Plato and Confucius (Ziegler & Heller, 2000). Domains of talent that were prized in ancient Athenian society – literary and artistic talents, skills in oratory and philosophical thinking, and physical abilities – are similar to those that were eventually favoured by later Western societies (Tannenbaum, 2000).

Plato was a forerunner of future educational philosophy in his belief that an enriched and selective schooling experience was necessary for the most able in order to develop the future leaders of a democratic Athenian society (Tannenbaum, 2000). This selective policy had as its aim the need to “nurture human excellence for its own sake and for the betterment of life in society” (p. 29), but without sacrificing the egalitarian principles that were central to Athenian traditions. Again, a parallel can be drawn between these ideas from an ancient civilisation and those of more modern thinkers. Francis Galton, in his 1869 treatise on hereditary genius, maintained if the aim was to preserve a finer society, special attention should be given to those who possessed intellectual superiority (Dai, 2010). Several Western countries, including New Zealand, have struggled throughout their history with the tension between the ideals of egalitarianism and the desire to encourage excellence for the benefit of society as a whole (Colangelo & Davis, 2003; Dai, 2010; Moltzen, 2011b; Tannenbaum, 2000).

A metaphysical view of giftedness evolved during the periods of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, which culminated in the cult of the genius (Robinson & Clinkenbeard, 2008; Ziegler & Heller, 2000). Individual talents were recognised and society rewarded its eminent writers, artists and early scientists, such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. During the Renaissance period, particular domains of excellence, such as those of art, writing, science, or mathematics, were emphasised. Interestingly, this domain-specific view is where conceptions of giftedness tend to sit today, as will be shown later in this chapter. In a less positive light, it was during this time that giftedness was associated with neuroses. Genius, in the Middle Ages, was seen to be one step away from mental instability, as “a state absolutely removed from that of normal comprehension” (Ziegler & Heller, 2000, p. 5). There was a superstitious awe around those of exceptional ability, and this is reflected in some more modern discourses that genius and madness are closely related. Simonton (2003), for example, reviewed several studies that explored “the ‘mad-genius’ controversy” (p. 367), surmising that there was some evidence to suggest that those with very high intelligence are more likely to exhibit traits of mental illness.

From IQ to multi-categorical

The rise in 20th century psychology pre-empted a new phase in the conceptualisation of giftedness and talent, that of the empirical viewpoint. Science began to play a part.

Galton presented a theoretical view of genius which was heavily influenced by Darwin's work, "one that assumed a biological and genetic etiology of giftedness" (Robinson & Clinkenbeard, 2008, p. 14). Giftedness was seen to be biologically determined. Galton collected data to investigate his theories and used an early form of mental testing to measure intelligence; his work can therefore be seen as a precursor to Alfred Binet's work in the early 20th century. He outlined his findings in his book, *Hereditary Genius*, published in 1869. The foremost of his conclusions was that genius is predominantly an inherited trait – although even in this early period, he did admit that one's environment played a part in reaching exceptional achievement (Colangelo & Davis, 2003; Dai, 2010; Robinson & Clinkenbeard, 2008).

Encouraged by Galton's work, in 1922 Lewis Terman began his seminal longitudinal study of giftedness, which culminated in half a century of work published in five volumes under the title *Genetic Studies of Genius*. His faith in the intelligence test as a measure of giftedness echoed the confidence in quantitative measurements that existed at that time (Clark, 2002; Dai, 2010). Until his death in 1956, Terman studied, tested and analysed the development and the behaviours of a group of students with an IQ above 140, known as the "Termites." The results from Terman's study contradicted earlier beliefs that gifted children were neurotic, susceptible to later mental illness and socially maladaptive (Robinson & Clinkenbeard, 2008). The majority of the subjects in his study were found to be not only superior in intellectual ability and occupational success, but also emotionally, physically and socially well-adjusted (Clark, 2002; Moltzen, 2011b; Passow, 2004; Tannenbaum, 2000). Terman's work also introduced the idea of prospective inquiry as opposed to the traditional retrospective studies of talent, which looked back at the lives of eminent individuals. Terman concluded that children could be identified at a young age as gifted, and that it was from this group of high IQ children that gifted adults would emerge (Borland, 2008; Robinson & Clinkenbeard, 2008; Tannenbaum, 2000). His work confirmed the premise that potential giftedness could be predicted from early childhood and high achievement expected from these children, provided circumstances were favourable for them as they grew up. This finding has influenced educational programmes today, in that such programmes aim to play a crucial role in developing such early promise.

Dai (2010) has maintained that “Terman started what might be called an *essentialist or realist tradition* of defining and explaining gifted potential” (p. 13). From this perspective, high intelligence is a unique quality or essence that sets those possessing it apart from their peers. This view was conducive to Terman’s admitted aim for his study (perhaps influenced by the popularity of eugenics at the time), which was to identify the most able students at a young age and then work with this hierarchy of ‘superior’ people in order to ‘better’ the human race (Dai, 2010; Passow, 2004).

There has been subsequent criticism of the restrictive identification processes used by Terman in his conceptualisation of giftedness, and of his aim to focus on this elite group as the leaders of society (Borland, 2008; Gladwell, 2008; Maitra & Gosain, 2009). Terman’s definition relied solely on the possession of a high IQ. His belief in a clear line between those who are gifted and those who are not has not sat well with current multi-dimensional conceptions of giftedness. Both Dai (2010) and Borland (2008) have noted that even in his own era, there were those who criticised Terman’s findings. Some queried the reliability of intelligence testing and pointed out that there was a social elitism among Terman’s subjects, who predominantly came from higher socio-economic, educated backgrounds. However, Terman’s overriding contribution to the scientific study of giftedness was foundational and has impacted significantly on current interpretations of the concept of giftedness (Dai, 2010). As Dai (2010) has noted:

Many still believe that standardized IQ tests, despite their fallibility, provide the best measures available of this essential human quality, and high IQ is a good indicator of intellectual giftedness, predictive of long term development and achievement. (p. 18)

Both Catherine Cox – a colleague of Terman’s – and Leta Stetter Hollingworth studied highly gifted children around the same time that Terman was collecting his data (Passow, 2004; Robinson & Clinkenbeard, 2008). They categorised gifted children as those with superior intelligence in literary and abstract knowledge and as being in the top 1–2% of their peers as assessed by IQ testing, which was in tune with the emphasis of the time (Knudson, 2006). Hollingworth did allude to the different domains of giftedness in her work, such as artistic or musical talent. Unlike Terman, she identified that there were issues of social adjustment for children with very high IQs. It is in this respect, in the social and emotional domain, that her work has

impacted on the understandings about the particular needs of gifted children today (Colangelo & Davis, 2003; Matthews & Foster, 2009).

When reviewing the literature on conceptions of giftedness that emerged in the 20th century following Terman's study, it is clear that the research was predominantly conducted in the United States and as such needs to be understood in this cultural context. Interest in giftedness, though, was not exclusively American. Tannenbaum (2000) has pointed to moves in the Western democracies of Germany (prior to the rise of Nazism), Great Britain, France and Switzerland to pay attention to the needs of their gifted children, at various times in their history. He also made the point, however, that it was the communist nations who invested the most in terms of resources and support for their gifted students. The gifted were seen as important resources for furthering the strength of a communist state. Despite this, the majority of discussions on the development of the construct of giftedness itself (in the English language, at least) have taken place in the American literature.

The restrictive notion that giftedness should be identified solely by IQ began to be critiqued more often by several writers in the 1940s and 1950s. The beginnings of a more inclusive conceptualisation emerged (Dai, 2010; Passow, 2004; Robinson & Clinkenbeard, 2008). Foremost among those who came to believe in a broader concept of giftedness was Paul Witty. Witty was influenced by both Terman and Hollingworth. He conducted a study of 100 gifted children, again selected on the basis of a high IQ, beginning in the late 1920s. However by the time he was writing in the 1950s, Witty had confirmed his more moderate position. He recognised both hereditarian and environmental factors in gifted individuals (Maitra & Gosain, 2009; Robinson & Clinkenbeard, 2008). The definition that he eventually favoured, with its emphasis on varying domains of talent and acknowledgement of a favourable environment in the development of talent, has significant parallels to modern views of giftedness. In 1953, he wrote:

In communities which offer children only sub marginal or very meagre opportunities the expression of intelligence may be different from that found in more fortunate or privileged areas. Moreover there are children whose abilities in art, music or writing, though rare and distinctive, can be recognised only by performance. Perhaps it is desirable to broaden our definition and to consider any child gifted

whose performance in a potentially valuable line of human activity, is consistently remarkable. (Witty, 1953, p. 255)

Although the move towards a more inclusive definition could be seen as positive, Witty's attempts at re-defining the concept were hampered by a lack of specificity (Passow, 2004), particularly in relation to the use of such terms as "*potentially valuable line of human activity*" and "*consistently remarkable*." There were problems in operationally defining such terms, a criticism that could also be levelled at the definitions used today.

The trend towards broadening the concept of giftedness was carried on by writers like Getzels and Jackson (1958). Borland (2008) noted that these researchers drew attention to "a previously over-looked population of gifted students, the creatively gifted" (p. 266). Subjects for the Getzels and Jackson study were selected not by IQ testing but by a barrage of creativity tests, something that was seen as revolutionary at the time (Passow, 2004). However, critics of the study pointed out that while the subjects scored highly on the creativity tests, they also possessed IQs well above average and thus could not truly be seen as a significantly separate group (Borland, 2008). The study did draw attention to the group of students who were creatively gifted, an important breakthrough for that particular period in history when the Americans were being outpaced by the Russians in the space race (Borland, 2008; Colangelo & Davis, 2003; Tannenbaum, 2000). With the launch of Sputnik in 1957, there was renewed and frantic interest in supporting the gifted, especially the creatively gifted, who were seen as the answer to the technological developments that were needed to win the space race. Bright students were needed as a national resource for the benefit of the nation and a flurry of activity towards the gifted was instigated. This enthusiastic focus on gifted children began to wane in the post-Kennedy 1960s as American society struggled to reconcile its egalitarian views with special attention for a group that was already seen to be advantaged (Tannenbaum, 2000).

The *Marland Report* of 1972 legitimised the view, first espoused by Witty, that giftedness exists across domains, when it listed six different categories in the first 'official' definition of giftedness (Colangelo & Davis, 2003). The categories nominated were general intellectual ability; specific academic aptitude; creative or productive thinking; leadership ability; visual and performing arts; and psychomotor

ability (Sisk, 2008). There was the realisation that human abilities could manifest in many different ways and giftedness was not solely related to a high cognitive ability measured by test performance. Authentic task performance and the recognition of potential as well as achievement were first introduced as alternative ways of thinking about giftedness. Several writers point to this report as having been highly influential in the move towards more developmental perspectives, which focus on multi-categorical definitions of giftedness (Borland, 2008; Colangelo & Davis, 2003; Matthews & Foster, 2009; McAlpine, 2004).

Joseph Renzulli presented what was seen as a ground-breaking model of giftedness in his early work in the late 1970s (Dai, 2010; Maitra & Gosain, 2009; Passow, 2004). He developed his conception based on an intersecting cluster of three traits – above average ability, task commitment and creativity – which he believed formed an effective operational definition of giftedness that was dynamic, rather than fixed, and pragmatic, as it could be used to identify gifted children for special programmes in schools. Sternberg's Triarchic Theory of Intelligence from 1985, emphasising analytical, creative and practical realms of talent, added to the expansion of ideas around the meanings of giftedness (Clark, 2002). The trend towards seeing intelligence as a broad inclusive concept was perhaps best encapsulated in the popular theory of multiple intelligences devised by Howard Gardner (Gardner, 1983). Gardner originally proposed seven intelligences (he later added an eighth and has considered more). He saw these intelligences as being relatively independent but supporting each other. Although some individuals may have exceptional abilities in all of Gardner's intelligences, it is usual that one is more well-developed than the others (Clark, 2002; Moltzen, 2011a). This sat at the opposite end of the continuum to Galton and Terman's ideas of intelligence as being fixed and measurable by testing. Although not developed as a theory relating specifically to giftedness, Gardner's work has influenced the field by recognising a more domain-specific view of human intelligence (Clark, 2002; McAlpine, 2004). However, critics of his theories, such as Kaufman and Sternberg (2008), have pointed to a lack of empirical evidence to test his ideas and noted that there is still a strong hierarchical factor to his selected intelligences.

Conceptualisations of giftedness have evolved from a focus on a fixed, inherited trait that could only be measured by mental testing to the definitions of today that hold dynamic and contextual qualities. Current ideas of giftedness have their foundations in the work of those who first began to research and write about the construct in the early 1900s, and in earlier theoretical and philosophical thinking. Tannenbaum (2000) described this vital link between past and present when he noted that:

The voices of present-day genius are not only different from those of previous times – they also codify current history as both reflectors and shapers of the society in which *they* live, just as their predecessors did in their own idiomatic, but era-inspired, ways when Western society was younger. (p.23)

The following section reviews the debates around the definitions that are predominant in the field today.

Current trends in conceptualising giftedness

Writers have continued to research and reflect on the concept of giftedness during the last two decades. It is apparent from literature that understandings about the notion of giftedness have undergone significant changes in this time, but still without any universal agreement being reached. Dai (2010) has suggested that “the term gifted or giftedness has never been more problematic than it is today” (p.8). Ontological issues around how those in the field might conceptualise the nature of giftedness have led to unresolved tensions. Debates and disagreements among academics writing in this area have evolved around several opposing arguments, not the least of which is the relative importance of nature and nurture in defining giftedness. To summarise every debate relating to the tensions that still exist in conceptualising giftedness is not possible in this review. Nevertheless, in order to provide a background to the ways in which giftedness is viewed currently in our global, modern world, some of the common arguments that have influenced current conceptual understandings are reviewed in this section.

Developmentalism versus essentialism

The traditional essentialist view of giftedness, a legacy of Terman’s early work, is based on the premise that there is a specific formula for defining and measuring what

is gifted and what is not (Dai, 2010). Those who have the required high level of intelligence are blessed with fixed traits that set them apart from those who do not have these 'gifts.' From an essentialist perspective, high intelligence is something that is genetically endowed, a neurological advantage that sets one apart from one's peers. Along with the right environmental circumstances, it is the possession of this high intelligence that will lead to ultimate achievement in later life (Balchin, 2009; Dai, 2010; Horowitz, 2004; Kaufman & Sternberg, 2008; Matthews & Folsom, 2009).

Contemporary conceptions of giftedness include some of the tenets of the essentialist view (Dai, 2010; Sternberg, 2003). However, as Kaufman and Sternberg (2008) have maintained, those involved in the field today understand that genetic endowment is not the only factor which predetermines giftedness, and developmentalist beliefs have garnered more support.

No serious gifted researcher today believes that general intelligence is the whole picture, or believes that gifted abilities are solely the result of innate, genetic endowment. If anything the trend over the past 20 years has been to emphasise external factors over internal factors. There seems to be a shift towards explaining the talent-development process (fourth wave) instead of merely listing static traits that are important to achieve giftedness (third wave). (Kaufman & Sternberg, 2008, p. 79)

A number of other researchers have concurred with this view. The widely held contemporary belief is that constructs of giftedness should be seen in a multi-dimensional way in which external factors interact with internal factors (Sternberg, Jarvin, & Grigorenko, 2010); that non-cognitive factors such as creativity, personality and motivation play a part (Chan, 2009; Gagné, 2009; Renzulli, 2002; Sternberg, 2003); and that the development of characteristics that might pertain to giftedness are shaped by social and environmental constraints (Chan, 2009; Dai, 2010; Gagné, 2009). In effect, the debate between an essentialist view and a developmentalist view mirrors the traditional nature versus nurture debate.

In recent years, there has been a paradigm shift in the literature from seeing giftedness through a rigid, categorical perspective – the essentialist position – to the recognition that there is a developmental trajectory (Matthews & Folsom, 2009). This reflects the foundational changes that have occurred in understandings about intelligence itself. A

developmentalist approach is grounded in the beliefs that giftedness is dynamic and malleable, and that the very nature of talent itself is constantly changing. Giftedness is an interaction between an individual and his or her environment; it is not stable and can change over time. Horowitz (2004) has maintained that conceptions about giftedness may differ at different periods in the life span. For example, Renzulli has referred to “schoolhouse giftedness” (Kaufman & Sternberg, 2008, p. 76), but this may not be as important in adulthood; as Sternberg (2000) pointed out, “in school, expertise in taking tests may be sufficient to label one as gifted. In adulthood, it almost never is” (p. 56). In addition, developmentalists do make the distinction between giftedness and talent, a further debate in the field that is on-going (Gagné, 2009; Tannenbaum, 2003). A developmentalist sees giftedness as potential and talent as the end result (Gagné, 2009; Kaufman & Sternberg, 2008). These views have been supported by several writers who place themselves firmly on the developmentalist side of the debate (Balchin, 2009; Horowitz, 2004; Kaufman & Sternberg, 2008; Reis & Housand, 2008; Sternberg, 2000).

The following core assumptions, described by Dai (2010), present a way of summarising this current change in thinking from essentialism to developmentalism. A developmental doctrine does not see the concept of giftedness as being a unitary one. For developmentalists, giftedness is about diversity – different domains, cultures and social contexts – as opposed to the essentialist view of a giftedness a set of core attributes. Developmentalists conceive of a dynamic state of giftedness rather than a static, fixed condition. Giftedness can emerge through exposure to interests and passions, and it is contextual. An individual’s abilities are shaped by environmental and social factors that may limit the development of exceptional performance, while enabling conditions will facilitate giftedness. A developmental view holds to a temporal state of giftedness. It is time-sensitive and related to task-specific performance rather than a fixed state of being. Early signs of giftedness do not necessarily carry through to later achievements, as exceptional talent can have different meanings at the different stages of development.

Mathews and Folsom (2009) contributed to this debate when they referred to the “mystery model” of giftedness and the “mastery model” (p. 18). The mystery model is an essentialist view in which identification of giftedness is achieved by intelligence

testing, and those identified as such are superior to others in innate, categorical ways which are constant across the lifespan. In contrast, a mastery model recognises “the dynamic nature of the development of expertise,” and the term mastery is used “to describe the on-going process that leads to gifted-level learning” (p. 18) – clearly aligning with a developmentalist belief. Mathews and Folsom (2009) also refer to Dweck’s work on “fixed mindsets” and “growth mindsets,” which has had some influence on the thinking of those trying to understand the giftedness concept (p. 20). They point out that there is an overlap with the mystery and mastery models of giftedness: a fixed mindset, in which ability is seen as innate and permanent, matches an essentialist or mystery view, and a growth mindset, in which ability grows over time and is subject to appropriate opportunities, resembles a mastery or developmentalist model.

It is clear from the recent literature that the current debate between developmentalism and essentialism in terms of conceptions of giftedness is weighted in favour of developmentalism. However, it is still acknowledged by most writers that some tenets of the essentialist view contribute to an overall understanding of giftedness, in much the same way that it has become accepted that nature and nurture work together to influence a child’s development.

Domain-general versus domain-specific

Early ideas about giftedness focused on domain-general definitions of giftedness in which a child would possess certain traits that were applicable across all areas of ability. A gifted child was someone who had the ‘g’ factor – a general propensity to excel in any area (Tannenbaum, 2003). A domain-general view sees giftedness as being about an exceptional ability to reason, to think in an abstract way, to solve problems and acquire knowledge (Dai, 2010). A domain-general conception of giftedness means a child is sometimes referred to as being “globally gifted” (Matthews & Foster, 2009).

As noted in the previous section on historical developments, there was a move as early as the 1970s to recognise that giftedness can occur within just one domain; that is, giftedness can be domain-specific. One can be a gifted artist without necessarily being gifted in mathematics. Domain-specific conceptualisations were further

exemplified by Gardner's work on multiple intelligences, which has been embraced by some proponents (in particular, practising educators) of this model of giftedness (Davis & Rimm, 2004; Matthews & Foster, 2009; Tannenbaum, 2003). It is this more inclusive and egalitarian domain-specific view that currently has the most support both theoretically and pedagogically (VanTassel-Baska, 2005; Ziegler & Heller, 2000).

Tannenbaum (2003) has identified a domain-general view of giftedness as being about a general intellectual ability that is transferable from one kind or task to another; this intelligence can be applied across a broad range of areas of human competencies. In contrast, a domain-specific view of giftedness focuses on diversity. A gifted individual can show excellence in at least one of a variety of aptitudes but not necessarily all aptitudes. Domain-specific theorists see giftedness as an achievement in a particular domain brought about by an ability to adapt to any environment or challenge related to that domain. Psychological variables such as creativity are part of the output of giftedness, not an input (Kaufman & Sternberg, 2008; VanTassel-Baska, 2005). The focus for a domain-specific conceptualisation is on enriching one's knowledge base and thus the development of expertise in a certain domain (Kaufman & Sternberg, 2008; Sternberg, 2000). A domain-specific view of giftedness fits with a developmentalist belief. Matthews and Folsom (2009) noted this in their summary of the debate below:

Domain-specificity is a key component of a developmental or mastery approach. Intelligence used to be considered a global attribute of a person, so that one might say about a given child, "He is gifted," and mean that he is exceptionally able in every intellectual endeavour. As we learn more about human development, however, we realise that it makes better sense to identify cognitive exceptionality in particular domains, saying for example, "She is mathematically gifted." (p. 19)

However, Dai (2010) has taken issue with some of the domain-specific theories, pointing out that 'domain' is a rather vague term which assumes that certain cognitive functions are bounded under one category. He has maintained that domains can be based on implicit and convenient models which are not empirically justified, and that some of the domains can overlap. For example, leadership is often touted as a separate domain of giftedness – but leadership can manifest itself in several other domains, such as creativity or psychomotor ability. Dai does allow that domain-specificity

plays a part in the development of giftedness, as “persons with particular configurations of abilities and dispositions tend to gravitate towards certain domains but not others” (p. 102).

A domain-specific conceptualisation encompasses a more equitable approach and acknowledges that there can be asynchronous development for some (Matthews & Foster, 2009). An individual may be seen as gifted in one domain or even several domains, but very few are gifted in all areas. There is, however, some disquiet over the acceptance of this model. Passow (2004, p. 10) posed the question, “Can an individual be outstanding in some very narrow area, only mediocre or even below average in most other areas and still be considered gifted?” Critics of Gardner’s Multiple Intelligence theory have stated that it could lead to the belief that all children are gifted in some way, suggesting that there is an ‘intelligence’ for everyone (Kaufman & Sternberg, 2008; Matthews & Foster, 2009; Tannenbaum, 2003).

The domain-specific conceptualisation of giftedness, with its broader focus, has been adopted by countries with an egalitarian tradition such as Australia, New Zealand and USA (Braggett & Moltzen, 2000; Knudson, 2006; Riley et al., 2004; Tannenbaum, 2000). Both the philosophical and pedagogical implications of linking to this model, rather than the traditional domain-general belief, are more easily accepted within societies such as these. It can, perhaps, be expected that such a conceptualisation would be favoured, as “compared to favouring theories of general intelligence ... it would seem more equitable for the largest possible number of people to qualify as outstanding in any skill of more or less use to society” (Tannenbaum, 2000, p. 50). A domain-specific theory of giftedness allows for a wider population to be considered gifted and in a diverse range of fields of human activity.

Giftedness as a socio-cultural phenomenon

A major paradigm shift that is currently on-going is that from a traditional view of giftedness as a measurable, trait-based construct to a multi-dimensional view that promotes an awareness of diversity and recognises that giftedness may mean different things to different cultural groups. This understanding aligns with the developmentalist view that an individual’s abilities are shaped by his or her social and environmental influences. One’s culture is an integral part of such influences. There is

a growing and empirically-evidenced view that understandings of giftedness and talent are specific to culture (Cohen, Ambrose, & Powell, 2000; Ford, 2003; Phillipson, 2007; Sternberg, 2007). Phillipson (2007) has maintained that any conception of giftedness would, in current times, be acknowledged as being “a socio-cultural phenomenon” (p. 14).

As early as 1986, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson were writing that talent is socially constructed. They recognised that understandings about giftedness and talent are governed by the needs, beliefs and traditions of the culture within which one finds oneself. In addition, for every culture and time there are gatekeepers who decide which qualities in a particular domain are used for the selection or identification of talent (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1986). Judgements about what may or may not constitute giftedness are made from the perspective of those who live and work within each respective culture.

In their influential book *Talented Teenagers*, Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde and Whalen (1997) concurred with this view, surmising that “although traits that could potentially lead to eminence in a domain may be biologically constituted, their recognition as talents is socially constructed with reference to the particular needs and values of a culture” (p. 24). Reis (2009), writing over ten years later, agreed that society – and educators within that society – should recognise that the ways in which we think about giftedness are based on the different traits within each differing societal population and develop programmes to reflect this diversity. Cohen et al. (2000) suggest that operating under a social-construction paradigm means that giftedness can be seen as including any abilities, knowledge or traits “that are valued or needed in a given society in a given era” (p. 333).

This raises questions about the traditional notion of giftedness as the possession of a high IQ. IQ is a cultural conception in itself, as it reflects a prediction of successful school performance. However, from a socio-cultural viewpoint, it is understood that school performance – a concept which is also socially constructed within a Western perception – is not necessarily valued highly by all cultures. Further, as has been noted in previous sections, a developmental perspective maintains that school performance can no longer be seen as an indication of giftedness once one has left school and is in the work force (Sternberg, 2000, 2007). Several writers have

acknowledged that in identifying gifted children, there is a danger that the focus is on the dominant culture's conceptualisation, ignoring the diversity of cultural context for many students (Chan, 2009; Cohen et al., 2000; Phillipson, 2007; Sternberg, 2007). Furthermore, gifted education today is still based on dominant culture conceptions, such as IQ testing for identification, which is not seen as capturing some of the culturally valued strengths of differing societies (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1997; Ford, 2003). Although many contemporary conceptions recognise cognitive intelligence as important, there is support for the belief that other kinds of intelligence or talents can be representative of giftedness as well (Sternberg, 2007). There has been a shift towards the understanding that socio-cultural contexts play a large part in shaping the assumptions of researchers about the phenomenon of giftedness, with an accompanying awareness of diversity and cultural context (Cohen et al., 2000).

A socio-cultural conception of giftedness takes into account the socialisation and nurturing of individuals in different cultural settings (Chan, 2009) and acknowledges that giftedness is a relative construct which is viewed differently by different groups (Ford, 2003). For example, it has been argued that Chinese understandings are still dominated by the teachings of Confucius, so the most valued characteristics of gifted individuals are perseverance, motivation and effort, plus a concern for the well-being of others (Chan, 2009) – while for Latin Americans, social competence is valued more strongly than cognitive intelligence (Sternberg, 2007). Social responsibility is highly valued in many African groups and would likely contribute to any conception of giftedness; this is similar to views of giftedness that exist in the Filipino culture (Sternberg, 2007). For the Yup'ik peoples of Alaska, intelligence is about exceptional skills needed for survival in a harsh environment, and for Kenyan children giftedness could be about a particular expertise in working with medicines that help protect the community from pesticides that ruin livelihoods (Phillipson, 2007). Sternberg (2007) has pointed out that these cultures do see cognitive abilities as important, as well as social and communal notions of intelligence, and conversely that Asian concepts of giftedness include advanced social skills. The honouring of different conceptions of giftedness should take into account the implicit understandings of those within the culture themselves rather than relying on cultural myths. Cohen et al. (2000) cautioned practitioners in the gifted education field to develop a “solid conceptual

base” in order to avoid “conceptual blind spots and [thus] ignore important elements” (p. 331).

The previous examples of conceptions of giftedness which manifest themselves in a variety of ways in different cultures have implications for pedagogical practices in any multi-cultural society. There can be no single ‘right’ definition of giftedness that holds true across culture and time (Phillipson, 2007). Therefore, it is the development of talents that will be useful for the particular socio-cultural context to which an individual belongs that should be of interest to educators and administrators who design and fund programmes for our talented youth. Further, educators whose teaching is underpinned by a socio-cultural conception of giftedness will recognise that simplistic, universal views of giftedness are not appropriate in a multi-cultural classroom or in our global society (Phillipson & McCann, 2007). Within one country, or one school, or one classroom, there may be several different understandings about giftedness held by several different cultural groups. Gladwell (2008), attempting to define success for the layperson, asserted that “it makes a difference where and when we grew up. The culture we belong to and the legacies passed down by our forebears shape the patterns of our achievement” (p. 19).

The legacy of the current shift towards an understanding of giftedness as a socio-cultural phenomenon is that educators today would better serve their students if they were to reject traditional, essentialist approaches as being the sole predictor of giftedness and embrace more innovative, non-traditional approaches (Borland, 2008). This will in turn lead to the recognition of a broader, more diverse population of gifted students in our schools and centres.

Historical conceptions of giftedness and the shifting paradigms around gifted education have shaped the understandings and debates that educators and researchers have had about the notion of giftedness (Cohen et al., 2000). It is these paradigms that influence the pedagogical decisions made about gifted education as a whole, and it is thus important to explore the nature of paradigm shifts in the field. Giftedness in the New Zealand context, as in other national contexts, has been influenced by these shifts and consequently holds implications for educators in New Zealand. This review moves now to a discussion on giftedness within the social and cultural milieu of New Zealand.

The New Zealand conceptualisation of giftedness

A review of the background to New Zealand conceptions of giftedness is restricted by the limited literature on giftedness and talent that is New Zealand based. Any research that does exist tends to have been carried out by a small group of committed researchers, and so there is a strong reliance on overseas research which does not reflect the context of New Zealand schools and centres (Riley et al., 2004). However, this dilemma in no way minimises the importance of endeavouring to understand how New Zealand educators view giftedness and talent. As Meuli (2006) asserted, “what one believes giftedness and talent to mean will drive what one is alert to look for” (p. 106), so the particular concept chosen by schools acts as a focal point for decisions around practice. Thus, within these constraints, this section explores the development of current conceptions of giftedness that exist in New Zealand, and which have influenced the conception of giftedness that underpins this research.

Early research and policy

There are two comprehensive summaries in the New Zealand literature of the historical development, through both research and policy, of gifted and talented education in this country. One is the chapter by Moltzen (2011b) in the only New Zealand-edited collection of perspectives from a variety of authors on giftedness and talent in the New Zealand context, and the other is Knudson’s (2006) book which reviewed the provision of gifted education in this country from 1878–2005.

Understandably, the progression of developments in gifted and talented education in New Zealand has mirrored the paradigm shifts that have occurred globally. Moltzen (2011b) saw this as disappointing, pointing out that New Zealand has an enviable and innovative record in many aspects of education – yet this has not been the case in our support for gifted and talented education, in respect to which “our history makes for bleak reading and our efforts have been variously described as patchy, inconsistent, uneven and weak” (p. 1).

George Parkyn’s *Children of High Intelligence*, written in 1948, was New Zealand’s own ground-breaking study in the area of giftedness (Moltzen, 2011b). This was the first comprehensive research about giftedness in a New Zealand context, and the publication led to increased interest in the needs of gifted children – although in

keeping with the essentialist views of the time, giftedness was seen as being solely in the cognitive domain. Parkyn was ahead of his time in that he recommended that schools cater for their gifted learners by using ability grouping, acceleration and enrichment/extension strategies (Knudson, 2006), which are some of the most common options that are considered by teachers in schools today. The 1950s saw some developments in the area, including a report by the Department of Education in 1955 which recommended that in line with the principles of equity, attention should be given to the gifted child (Knudson, 2006); however, the preferred option was for this to happen within the regular classroom (Moltzen, 2011b). Somewhat ironically, the authors of the report believed it could be perceived as being inequitable for other pupils who were not eligible for segregated classes. Sixty years later, there is still considerable support for this view in many New Zealand schools.

Knudson (2006) reported that activity in the area of gifted and talented education prospered nationally in the 1960s on the back of the 1955 report. New Zealand was not immune to the global climate of support for technology and innovation in the Space Race era. The rationale that supporting our brightest individuals would be of benefit primarily to one's society came to the fore. Knudson (2006) called this the "payback" approach (p.198). This philosophy was demonstrated by policy stated in the New Zealand government's Currie Commission of 1962, which noted that in respect to these "men and women of exceptional capacity," it is obvious that "as our economy advances and diversifies, the demands for such persons should grow greater" (cited in Moltzen, 2011b, p. 5).

Towards the end of the 1960s, support for gifted education once again dwindled, for no apparent reason – although this may have been influenced by a similar waning of activity in other countries. Both Knudson (2006) and Moltzen (2011b) have pointed to a lack of leadership from the Department of Education as one reason why support fell, emphasising the refusal of the Department to develop a national policy for gifted education despite encouragement from experts in the field to do so. The lack of national direction led to an overall picture in which some schools were innovative in their approaches and others failed to develop any policies at all for their gifted students (Knudson, 2006). The 1970s and 1980s saw a continuation of this ad hoc approach to provisions for gifted education in New Zealand. Renewed pressure came

on schools after 1989 with the move to self-management and a partnership model with communities in which parents had a role in governance. There was now a vehicle, via Boards of Trustees, for parents to advocate for increased provisions for gifted and talented students in schools. However, in communities where gifted education was not seen as important, support wavered and it was unlikely that funds would be available for the gifted area if there was limited enthusiasm in the school community (Moltzen, 2011b). Reflecting the philosophy that schools should determine their own definition of giftedness, the Ministry in the 1990s did not denote a national definition and in fact have avoided doing so to this date.

New directions in policy

According to Knudson (2006), this laissez-faire approach on the part of the MOE, in which “schools were free to determine their own parameters when deciding the concept of giftedness” (p. 108), allowed for innovative programmes to be developed in some pioneering schools. These were based around an idiosyncratic conceptualisation that was specific to that particular school and community. Moltzen (2011b) maintained that there was a “greater openness to innovative approaches in the 1990s” (p. 16). However, in those schools where there was a confused understanding of what giftedness was about, teachers were left feeling insecure and uncertain; consequently, they did not feel either qualified or motivated enough to adopt any specific programmes to support gifted learners. In the late 1990s, perhaps as a result of continuing advocacy from individuals and self-managing organisations involved in the field, the MOE finally moved towards developing support for educators who worked with gifted and talented learners (Knudson, 2006; Moltzen, 2011b).

Under the leadership of Trevor Mallard, then Minister of Education, several initiatives were instigated in the area of gifted and talented education between 1996 and 2005. These progressed from the setting up of a MOE Advisory Group on Gifted Education in 1997 to the ground-breaking decision to add an amendment to the National Administration Guidelines (NAGs), to which all schools in New Zealand must adhere, in 2005. This amendment, NAG 1 (c) iii, required every school to identify gifted and talented students and provide for them appropriately (Ministry of Education, 2012b). In order to assist teachers who had little or no understanding about giftedness – and thus, programme provision – the MOE commissioned the writing of a handbook to be

made available for all schools and centres in New Zealand. *Gifted and Talented Students: Meeting Their Needs in New Zealand Schools* (2000) was developed, and within this handbook was the philosophy around a particularly New Zealand concept of giftedness. Moltzen (2011b), who was one of the authors, has written:

In keeping with the educational environment in New Zealand, this publication is not prescriptive but rather provides schools and teachers with a wide range of options. For example, no single definition of giftedness and talent is recommended and each school is encouraged to consult with its community to select or develop a concept that is consistent with the values and priorities of the community to which it belongs. (p. 17)

Thus, the entrenched belief within this country that it was not appropriate to enforce a national definition of giftedness onto schools remained. Instead, the handbook offered a general overview about the concept of giftedness and talent, linking the two terms together in what is now the accepted terminology used in New Zealand – ‘gifted and talented.’ The handbook is the major resource for teachers who work with gifted and talented learners (a revised version was published in 2012), so it is appropriate to include in this background section its general statements about the conceptualisation of giftedness and talent. These are outlined below. The writers reflected and advocated the particular conceptions of giftedness that were endorsed by the MOE and provided the guidelines for review officers from the ERO, who are responsible for checking schools’ compliance with NAG 1 (iii).

The gifted and talented represent a wide range of students with many different abilities. Some students, for example, may have exceptional abilities in science or technology, some in art or poetry, and others in social leadership. It is now accepted that the gifted and talented are not simply those with high intelligence.

The range of special abilities that relate to the concept of giftedness and talent has become quite broad over the years and includes general intellectual abilities, academic aptitude, creative abilities, leadership abilities and abilities in the visual and performing arts.

New Zealand is a multi-cultural society with a wide range of ethnic groups ... It is important that each school incorporates relevant cultural values into its concept of giftedness and talent. (Ministry of Education, 2000, p. 12)

The writers of the handbook were only too aware that there was a conundrum for them in not providing a single definition of giftedness and talent, but they adhered to the belief that schools should develop their own approaches, underpinned by their own contextualised definitions (Moltzen, Riley, & McAlpine, 2001). They also recognised that if they presented too many options for teachers, this could lead to further confusion.

Despite this acknowledged tension, some overriding premises about a New Zealand concept of giftedness are consistent in the body of work produced in the past decade from New Zealand authors, including MOE reports and commissioned publications (Bevan-Brown & Taylor, 2008; Education Review Office, 2008; McAlpine, 2004; Ministry of Education, 2000, 2012a; Moltzen, 2011d; Riley et al., 2004). There is some agreement around current conceptualisations in New Zealand.

Current New Zealand conceptualisations

Giftedness is a social construct: therefore inclusiveness is the philosophy of choice for ensuring equity and excellence. (Ford, 2003, p. 518)

Ford's assertion related to giftedness in the United States but it could just as easily encompass the prevailing philosophy in New Zealand schools and their communities with respect to gifted education. New Zealand society is infused with egalitarian values, although the reality of an egalitarian society is contestable. These beliefs are encapsulated in the cautious attitudes of New Zealand teachers, who do not want to be seen as giving any advantage to one group above another group (Knudson, 2006; Moltzen, 2011b). There has been strong support for an anti-elitist society in which no one person should hold themselves above another or be given any extra advantages in life. According to a variety of writers, this particular notion of egalitarianism has impacted on much of New Zealand's educational development, significantly so in the field of gifted and talented education (Braggett & Moltzen, 2000; Keen, 2005; Knudson, 2006; Moltzen, 2011b). The socio-cultural milieu of this country has led to a tension between those who hold the belief that there should be equitable educational opportunities for gifted and talented learners and those with the view that the gifted already possess an advantage over others and should not be accorded any further privilege. Moltzen (2011b) recorded that some believe the needs of our gifted learners

in New Zealand are too often “subsumed by the needs of the majority” (p. 14). Thus, what are seen as the equity issues of the many may dominate any attempts at promoting excellence for the few.

Aligned with these egalitarian beliefs, there is a view that a New Zealand construction of giftedness has been influenced by an implicit embracing of anti-intellectualism in New Zealand society (Knudson, 2006). The phrase ‘Tall Poppy Syndrome’ has become part of the New Zealand vernacular and is frequently used in reference to gifted and talented learners (Knudson, 2006; Moltzen, 2011b). There has traditionally been a reluctance to promote academic excellence in case it could be seen as ‘skiting’ or ‘showing off’ on the part of the learners, something which has historically been frowned upon in our culture and therefore in our schools. For example, the students in a study by Knudson (2006) reported that they were discouraged from demonstrating their academic abilities publicly and that they saw being academically gifted as a social inhibitor. Austin and Hastwell (2010) found similar degrees of discomfort among the students they interviewed for their book about high-achieving secondary school students in Australia and New Zealand, stating that “the intellectual cringe is legendary in New Zealand and Australia – it’s OK to be brilliant at sport but somehow not too cool to be good at schoolwork” (p.95). The students interviewed for this book confirmed this view in their personal comments.

Australia and New Zealand seem to share this disquiet about anyone who is highly intelligent, perhaps reflecting a fear that these individuals might become ‘up themselves,’ an Australasian colloquial term meaning over-confident and arrogant. It has been argued that egalitarianism has led to a desire for conformity in both countries. One needs to fit within the mainstream of the easy-going, relaxed ‘Aussie’ or ‘Kiwi’ cultures (McCann, 2007; Moltzen, 2011b). Interestingly, and as noted by Austin and Hastwell (2010), this same reluctance to celebrate excellence is not apparent in terms of sporting achievements. Both countries publicly celebrate sporting success with enthusiasm. None the less, the predominance of the ‘Tall Poppy Syndrome’ has impacted on conceptions of giftedness in New Zealand, where a domain-specific, broad and inclusive conceptualisation is promoted as a better fit within this country’s social milieu.

The tensions described above have underpinned the conceptualisations of giftedness and talent in this country. Riley et al. (2004) have maintained that a multi-categorical concept of giftedness sits well with New Zealand educators. Recognising a broad range of abilities, as set out in the MOE handbook (2012a) and supported by the evaluation report on schools' provisions for gifted and talented students from the ERO (2008), allows for an inclusive approach that respects egalitarian philosophies. However, some have argued that there is a danger in embracing too broad a definition of giftedness. The concept should be about exceptionality in a particular area, without falling into the trap of watering down what is considered as giftedness (Riley et al., 2004). This could lend support to the 'every child is gifted' view which is held by many educators in New Zealand. Moltzen (2011b) worried that such a conceptual belief might work against the provision of equitable opportunities for gifted and talented learners. Despite such concerns, there has been an acceptance in this country of a diverse range of definitions of giftedness, supported by what Knudson (2006, p. 20) termed the "eclectic, inclusive approach" evident in the handbook and other literature from the past decade (Bevan-Brown & Taylor, 2008; Cathcart, 2005; McAlpine & Moltzen, 2004; Riley et al., 2004). It could be concluded that a New Zealand concept of giftedness has been strongly influenced by the desire to balance an idealised egalitarian social background with the need to support our best and brightest so that they may contribute to this society and achieve their own goals in life.

As conceptions of giftedness have changed internationally to favour a developmentalist view, this paradigm shift has impacted on current New Zealand constructions. The MOE (2002) document included among its stated Core Principles that the environments in schools and centres "are powerful catalysts for the demonstration and development of talent" (p. 3). Knudson (2006) saw giftedness as a "diffuse concept" (p. 18) that could be affected by environmental influences and recognised that understandings change over time. Riley et al. (2004) and Easter (2011) wrote about a responsive learning environment, recommending that identification of gifts and talents should be on-going throughout the schooling years. Cathcart (2005) has called this an "invitational environment," one which "is constantly offering children a variety of opportunities to display gifted behaviour" (p. 14). Riley et al. (2004) emphasised that "giftedness and talent is a living, breathing, ever-changing concept" (p. 11). It is clear from these writers that the current New

Zealand conception is strongly underpinned by a developmentalist belief of the dynamic, fluid nature of giftedness and talent.

Many New Zealand schools have chosen to base their concepts of giftedness around Gagné's Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent, the DMGT (Gagné, 2003; Moltzen, 2011a), which inherently supports the above conceptualisation and holds true to the inclusive principles that educators favour. The MOE (2012a) also implicitly supports the use of this model by including a section on it in the handbook for teachers (p. 29). Gagné's model sees giftedness and talent as two separate but related concepts. He maintained that one can be gifted without being talented, as a student may not always translate his or her gifts in any particular domain into high achievement. However, one cannot be talented without being gifted. In order to achieve at an exceptional level in any field of human endeavour one must first possess what Gagné terms "natural abilities" or "gifts" (Gagné, 2003, p. 61) in that domain. According to Gagné there are several catalysts, which can be intrapersonal or environmental, that contribute to the developmental process that helps to transform innate abilities into "talents" or "specific expert skills" (p. 72). It is this developmental process of learning, training and practising that has the greatest impact on talent development. Although Gagne's approach has been criticised by some as being too liberal (Moltzen, 2011a), he did emphasise that the transformation into talent must show outstanding or superior mastery in a field (Gagné, 2003, 2009).

Adding to this understanding of giftedness has been a growing recognition of the importance of multi-cultural understandings of giftedness and how these apply to the gifted and talented learners in our schools. The work of Bevan-Brown (2004, 2005, 2009) drew the attention of educators to a New Zealand Māori concept of giftedness. Bevan-Brown (2004) maintained that a Māori concept includes a recognition of giftedness in a group context: a belief that one's talents should be used to benefit a community, that exceptional personal and moral qualities as well as outstanding skills are valued as areas of giftedness, and that a strong knowledge of Māori culture and identity can be seen as an indicator of giftedness. Her work led to the inclusion of Māori aspects of giftedness in the core principles set out by the MOE in 2002. The relevant principle states that "Māori perspectives and values must be embodied in all

aspects of definition, identification and provision for gifted and talented learners” (p. 3).

Bevan-Brown encouraged teachers to view the concept of giftedness through “cultural lenses” (2009, para. 3) but acknowledged that many are unsure as to how to achieve this in practice. She claimed that educators need to understand that certain areas of giftedness can be interpreted in different ways depending on one’s cultural lens. For example, a Māori concept of gifted leadership would include a ‘behind the scenes’ type of leadership, in contrast to the more obvious ‘out the front’ style favoured in western cultures. Further, Bevan-Brown warned that different priorities are placed on particular areas of giftedness, and that these may differ from culture to culture.

Although a multi-categorical concept of giftedness is supported in New Zealand schools, she argued that intellectual and physical areas of giftedness are prioritised in practice, whereas within a Māori concept affective qualities are more highly valued (Bevan-Brown, 2009). She also advocated a culturally responsive environment, in line with a developmentalist approach; this should be an environment where Māori students feel that their culture is affirmed and respected, which will in turn allow the talents of gifted Māori to surface. She recommended that teachers, parents and students within communities be involved in developing a mutually agreed definition of the concept of giftedness. Research by Jenkins, Moltzen and Macfarlane (2004) found that within an educational framework where “culture counts” (p.83), gifted Māori students can feel comfortable about displaying their abilities. Webber (2011a) concurred, suggesting that there is a synergy between a positive Māori identity and high achievement for Māori students.

There has been an increase in research completed over the past decade looking at the socio-cultural aspects of giftedness and talent from a Māori perspective (Mahuika, 2007; Webber, 2011a, 2011b) but less has been written that encompasses giftedness from the perspective of other minority cultures in New Zealand. A socio-cultural perspective would support the view, encompassed in recent Ministry documents, that New Zealand is a multi-cultural society made up of several ethnic groups, and that this should be taken into account when conceptualising giftedness (Bevan-Brown & Taylor, 2008; Education Review Office, 2008; Ministry of Education, 2012a). If this is the case, it would seem that more research could be done looking at giftedness from

the point of view of Pasifika and perhaps Asian cultures. There is a dearth of published research conducted in New Zealand addressing giftedness within these cultural identities – although some unpublished theses are available (Frengley-Vaipuna, Kupu-Macintyre, & Riley, 2011; Galu, 1998) – yet both of these ethnic groups are widely represented in our schools and centres.

It can be concluded that the current conceptualisation of giftedness in New Zealand is a broad, inclusive one that is underpinned by several foundational principles. These are the support of a multi-categorical understanding of giftedness consummate with a domain-specific view; the recognition of a developmentalist approach that identifies potential as well as performance; and the understanding that giftedness is apparent across all societal groups and stands in relation to what is valued by a particular culture, reflecting a socio-cultural position that embraces the diverse values of a multi-cultural society.

Explicit theories and implicit theories

Several writers have described conceptions of giftedness in terms of either explicit or implicit theories (Maitra & Gosain, 2009; Miller, 2008; Phillipson, 2007; Sternberg et al., 2010; Sternberg & Zhang, 2004). Miller (2008) stated that an explicit theory of giftedness is a combination of the theorist's individual understanding and the research that has been done in the field. An explicit theory is thus explained and evidenced by the literature from the field. Explicit theories look for empirical evidence to answer such questions as: how can we differentiate between gifted students and non-gifted students? Can later exceptional performance be accurately predicted?

An implicit theory, in contrast, is a construction that is located in the mind of an individual. It consists of informal, personal beliefs about giftedness, based on an individual's own experiences, and is influenced by the values of the individual's culture (Phillipson, 2007). Dai (2010) has described an implicit theory as the intuitions that people have about what designates giftedness, or the folk beliefs which link understandings of giftedness to a particular culture. In effect, an implicit theory is what a layperson thinks about giftedness. Implicit theories are relativistic, as there is no guarantee that personal values will be constant across time and space (Sternberg et al., 2010).

The review of the literature covered in the previous sections presents broad theories of giftedness that have been made explicit through empirical and theoretical studies and the writing that has been produced around these studies. I have attempted to summarise these explicit theories as a background to this specific study on giftedness and talent.

However, the focus for this study leans heavily towards implicit theories of giftedness which are shaped by the socio-cultural environment that is New Zealand. This was a purposeful decision on the part of the researcher and was influenced by the epistemological question, “Who is qualified to judge what is giftedness?” If this study aimed to be true to the phenomenological tenet that participants are the experts on their own experiences (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005) then the answer to this question would need to be the students, and their parents and teachers. Thus, although for the purpose of this study giftedness is perceived in line with current trends in New Zealand, concepts about giftedness and talent that fit predominantly under the mantle of implicit theories of giftedness and which are influenced by the lived experiences of the participants within the context of New Zealand society are also presented.

Part Two: About achievement and underachievement

At what point does underachievement end and achievement begin?
(Delisle & Berger, 1990, p. 1)

The following section in this background to the study summarises the literature around the conceptualisation of the phenomena of interest, achievement and underachievement. Few studies were found that related specifically to understandings of what achievement for gifted and talented learners might be about. However, there has been a large number of studies on the ‘problem’ of underachievement for gifted and talented learners, and many have included debates on the definition of the term itself.

What is achievement?

There has been some dispute around ways of defining achievement for gifted and talented learners (Morisano & Shore, 2010), and defining the concept remains

problematic (Reis & McCoach, 2000). However, conceptualisations in the literature do seem to be firmly couched around the perception that achievement is related to academic performance. Further, this academic conceptualisation is couched in terms of measurement – most commonly classroom performance, such as grades or rankings, and standardised achievement test scores (Reis & McCoach, 2000). Researchers looking at comparative studies of achievement and underachievement in gifted students have tended to develop criteria based on these kinds of measurements to designate those students who will be the ‘gifted achievers’ for their studies. For example, in a study comparing a sample of gifted high achievers and gifted underachievers, Colangelo, Kerr, Christensen and Maxey (1993) defined high achievement as scoring at or above the 95th percentile on the American College Testing program (ACT), but also as holding a high school grade point average (GPA) of 3.75 (on a 4.00 scale). Further studies comparing the performances of gifted achievers and gifted underachievers have continued to define achievement in similar ways, assigning those students who make up the gifted achievers group solely through academic measurement means (Bergner & Neubauer, 2011; Peterson, 2000; Peterson & Colangelo, 1996; Smith, 2006).

A recent Australian study by Figg et al. (2012), which categorised gifted students as achievers, underachievers or selective consumers, took the same approach to defining achievement when selecting the achievers group. A student needed a standardised GAT (General Achievement Test) result at the 85th percentile or higher, and to consistently rank within the top 15% for their age group to be labelled an achiever. Lee-Corbin and Denicolo’s (1998) case study research relied on a combination of standardised data and the judgement of teachers to define the achievement levels of their gifted students. The children were judged to be ‘able’ by virtue of scoring above the 90th percentile on two intelligence tests. Teachers were then asked to assess whether a student was achieving well above the expected level for their age and if work was generally completed and done well.

The literature reviewed did not tend to explore implicit understandings about the phenomenon of achievement. There were some writers who held the belief that most gifted and talented students themselves saw high achievement as the determinant of ability; if they did not achieve, then that meant they were not smart in the first place.

It followed that gifted students did not equate effort with achievement, only innate ability (Rimm, 2006; Siegle, 2013; Siegle & McCoach, 2005).

Generally, conceptualisations around achievement were presented in terms of a counter to the phenomenon of underachievement. There were broad descriptors of achievement along a range of performance criteria, as the above examples illustrate, but the concept of achievement was more often used to imply that if the required level was not being reached then underachievement was occurring. Any discussion of underachievement assumed that there was an opposite end of the continuum that is achievement. It was interesting that most studies did not attempt to investigate explications of achievement for gifted and talented learners, and that this was seen as a ‘given.’ This was not the case for the phenomenon of underachievement for gifted and talented students. The literature that focuses on debates around both the meaning of underachievement and the issues surrounding underachievement for gifted and talented learners is much more extensive than that found on achievement.

What is underachievement?

One might suppose that a definition of underachievement is a simple matter. After all, intuitively, does not the term suggest that a student is functioning less well than he or she could? But what is the meaning of ‘less well’ or ‘could’? (Kornrich, as cited in Butler-Por, 1993, p. 650)

Kornrich posed these questions in relation to underachievement in gifted students in 1965. They are still relevant today, as despite decades of further research on underachievement in gifted and talented students, they have not yet been answered. The problem of measuring what might be “as well as one could” (presumably meaning his or her ability) for a gifted and talented student, and the varying perspectives of those who might be deciding on the accepted level of ability, point to difficulties in agreeing on any kind of universal definition. A definition of underachievement is not a simple matter. In fact, it is interesting that the same statement about the lack of a universal definition for the construct of giftedness that began this chapter could just as easily be applied to the phenomenon of underachievement in gifted and talented students. This too has been the subject of much debate in the field, without consensus having been reached (Figg et al., 2012). Rather, the search for an accepted, functional definition of gifted underachievement

continues to create controversy (Reis & McCoach, 2000), with some maintaining that any definition could be seen as meaningless because of the variability of those proposed in the literature (Hoover-Schultz, 2005). James Delisle, one of the most prolific writers on the issue of gifted underachievement, has stated baldly that “the problem of underachievement begins with its definition” (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002, p. 174).

In a review of three decades of research into the underachievement of gifted learners, Reis and McCoach (2000) asserted that the phenomenon remained an enigma for researchers, educators and parents alike. The lack of clarity in understanding underachievement for gifted students is reflected in the concluding statements from Reis and McCoach, which could be seen as contradictory. While they concluded that “the absence of any clear, precise definition of gifted underachievement restricts research-based comparisons and hinders the quest for suitable interventions,” they then noted that “broad inclusive definitions of gifted underachievement allow more flexibility in the identification of gifted underachievers,” but “the plethora of definitions and identification methods contribute to the difficulty in studying the characteristics of this population” (p. 167). It is difficult to deduce whether these reviewers would have preferred one single operational definition of underachievement for the gifted, or whether they in fact adhered to the view that it is neither possible nor preferable for such a construct to be universally agreed upon. The debates around definitions of gifted underachievement tend to take their discourses from one or other of these two stances.

The discrepancy definition

The most common description of underachievement in gifted and talented students is to describe it as a discrepancy between ability and achievement (Butler-Por, 1993; Chaffey, Halliwell, & McCluskey, 2006; Clark, 2002; Coil, 2005; Davis & Rimm, 2004; Hoover-Schultz, 2005; Montgomery, 2009; O'Neill, 2011; Reis & McCoach, 2000; Rimm, 2006). Terms such as ‘performance,’ ‘work produced’ and ‘academic school grades’ are used interchangeably for ‘achievement,’ while ‘potential,’ ‘estimated potential,’ ‘capability,’ ‘expected achievement’ and ‘predicted achievement’ are synonyms for ‘ability’ in some definitions. In addition, various phrases are employed to denote the discrepancy concept. For example, Schultz

(2002a) has stated that most definitions include “searching for a discrepancy of some sort” (p. 204) when comparing ability and achievement, while Coil (2005) labelled underachievement “a gap between their ability and what they actually produce” (p. 1). Ziegler and Stoeger (2004) noted that underachievement is commonly defined in the literature as “scholastic performances which fall short of the expectations made based on individual talent measurements” (p. 62). Garvis (2009), in a study of underachieving adolescents in Queensland, Australia, defined gifted underachievement as “classroom performance that is significantly below what would be expected from some measure of the student’s potential” (p. 23); it would follow, then, that this measure of the expected ability of the student is in fact ‘achievement.’ Clark (2002) advocated a more specific definition that is based on some form of approved measurement. The ability should be evidenced by performance on a standardised test of intellectual ability, and the discrepancy between performance and ability would need to be considerable and occur over time in order for underachievement to be categorised. Several other writers adhered to a specific measurement base as evidence of a discrepancy in their definition, thus defining ability or potential in terms of IQ or some other form of achievement test (Davis & Rimm, 2004) and achievement, or lack of it, in terms of teacher assessments, GPAs or results in class work and tests (Bergner & Neubauer, 2011; Butler-Por, 1993; Colangelo et al., 1993; Figg et al., 2012).

Davis and Rimm (2004) have also argued that the concept of a discrepancy should be a part of any definition. However, they pointed out that there is an issue in not qualifying or quantifying what is meant by ‘discrepancy,’ which makes it difficult to judge when underachievement is actually occurring. Reis and McCoach (2000) supported this concern when they noted that “distinguishing exactly what constitutes a discrepancy between ability and achievement also poses challenges” (p. 154). The variations in how both ability and achievement are measured can cause differences in the identification of underachievers. Definitions that rely on IQ (ability) and achievement test scores (achievement) may not pick up those students who teachers and parents consider to be underachieving because of poor school performance, but who show no discrepancy between the two test scores (Rimm, 2006, 2008). Gifted and talented students are capable of performing at an above-average level on school tests but in fact such a level is unlikely to be consummate with their actual abilities

(Gross, 2004). As a result, some students may be under-identified. In addition, such definitions continue to ignore current understandings that achievement can be a multi-categorical concept representing abilities across a number of fields.

Reis and McCoach (2000) carried out the most recent meta-analysis of three decades of research on the underachievement of gifted students, which included a review of the issues relating to understandings about the concept itself. The authors divided the definitions from their review into three general themes which they viewed as qualitatively different. They concurred that most definitions included a discrepancy between ability and achievement but suggested that both these concepts need to be operationally defined in order to make a judgement that there is cause for concern about a particular student. Thus, they proposed what they believed to be a feasible, but far from perfect, operational definition for future researchers:

Underachievers are students who exhibit a severe discrepancy between expected achievement (as measured by standardised achievement test scores or cognitive or intellectual ability assessments) and actual achievement (as measured by class grades and teacher evaluation). Gifted underachievers are underachievers who exhibit superior scores on measures of expected achievement. (p. 157)

There has been some support for this functional definition in the field (Balduf, 2009; Rimm, 2006), but there are several writers (see the next section) who have expressed discomfort around the emphasis on measurement. The focus on an IQ score or a standardised test of measurement as a measure of ability or achievement does not fit with current conceptualisations of giftedness, which have moved away from an essentialist view, based on a fixed categorisation, to a broader, multi-dimensional concept.

How do you measure potential?

Much of the literature that is concerned with underachievement in gifted and talented students refers at some stage to the concept of ‘unfulfilled potential.’ A child who does not perform to his or her potential is deemed to be underachieving, and remediation is about ensuring that students are helped to ‘reach their potential.’ The term ‘potential’ has already been visited in some examples of definitions above, a measure of the frequency of its use in almost all of the literature found on

underachievement. Kanevsky and Keighley (2003), for example, defined underachievers as those “not living up to their potential” (p. 20), Reis (2009) wrote of “school performance which falls noticeably short of potential” (p. 321) and Balduf (2009) argued that underachieving students “need more assistance to reach their potential” (p. 274). Various other writers have similarly referred to the concept of potential when defining underachievement for gifted learners (Chaffey et al., 2006; Colangelo et al., 1993; Davis & Rimm, 2004; Montgomery, 2009).

Despite the frequent, perhaps excessive use of ‘potential’ as a term in definitions about gifted underachievement, there have been several writers who have openly expressed discomfort over its use (Butler-Por, 1993; Clark, 2002; Delisle, 1999; Matthews & Foster, 2009; Pomerantz & Pomerantz, 2002). Although many researchers have argued that as many as half of gifted students could be achieving significantly below their potential (Morisano & Shore, 2010) this growing body of writers believe that it is not possible to adequately measure a concept such as potential, and so it is not morally acceptable to include the term in any definition about underachievement for these students. Butler-Por (1993) felt that researchers could not assess potential accurately enough to predict performance; thus, using this as a central term in definitions of underachievement was fraught with difficulties. Further, she favoured a broadening of the concept of potential to include creativity, and the observations of both teachers and parents. Clark (2002) dismissed the “commonly used definition of not performing up to capability or potential” (p. 541). She maintained that because the concept is not measurable, there is no way to indicate how significant the discrepancy between evidence of achievement and any perceived ability may be.

Other researchers have agreed with Clark’s stand. For example, in their study of 26 able underachieving teenagers in England, Pomerantz and Pomerantz (2002) acknowledged the problems around measuring “human activity such as potential” (p. 3). They were not willing to decide on arbitrary measures of potential or achievement for their study purposes, and instead asked teachers at selected schools to identify the participants for their study.

Robertson (2003) asked the question “Who defines the criteria by which potential is reached?” Her answer was that despite the wealth of research on underachievement in

gifted students, the literature does not address such a question. For the students themselves, there is a quandary in being told that they are not reaching their potential when they are unlikely to have any understanding of what working to one's potential means (Delisle, 1999). As Delisle wrote, somewhat cynically, "No one ever says, 'Ok, you've reached your potential, so you can relax now'" (p. 1). However, the preference for defining underachievement through the concept of unfulfilled potential remains in the recent literature, despite disquiet over the ubiquitous use of this term.

Problematising underachievement

The conceptualisation of gifted underachievement in students as being the fault of the students themselves – where students are lazy, unmotivated or have behaviour problems – has long been the preferred discourse (Seeley, 1993). This problematising of underachievement has been criticised by several writers, led by Delisle (1990, 1994), who challenged researchers to reframe the label of underachievement and to move away from the blaming mode. Delisle and Berger (1990) asserted that underachievement should be defined as a behaviour which can be changed over time, and which is both content and situation specific. Its perception is in the eye of the beholder, so conceptualisations of the concept may mean different things to teachers, students and parents. Delisle (1994) viewed the term 'underachievement' as "one of the most overused and misapplied terms used in our field" (p. 1). He opposed the labelling of gifted students as underachievers and wondered if the adults who assign the label were in fact accentuating the harm when they impose unrealistic expectations on a child – loading the child with the responsibility for high potential not being reached. He felt that this deficit model, in which the child is the problem and therefore underachievement is all about the child, had resulted in the variations of definitions of underachievement existing in the views of those of who deem it to be a problem.

Several other authors have shown support for Delisle's concerns (Coil, 2005; Matthews & Foster, 2009; Rimm, 2008; Robertson, 2003; Schultz, 2002a). Schultz (2002a) maintained that when the educational context in which a student is placed or the curriculum which the student is given are unsuitable, labelling a student as an underachiever for not working to his or her potential is misplacing the blame. The environment is the problem, not the student, and it is unprofessional to place the entire

responsibility on to the learner. Schultz saw a need for a broadening of understandings about the phenomenon of underachievement, as “being labelled an underachiever is a subjective matter based on confounding empirical, perceptual, and intuitive evidence” (p. 204). Robertson (2003), too, held the view that the use of the word underachievement is from a deficit model of thinking. She believed it is performing a disservice to gifted students to firstly label them underachievers and secondly categorise them as problems. However, she noted that the common perception of the phenomenon in the extensive literature is situating it as a pathology, a troubling situation that needs to be fixed. Robertson also pointed out that although much has been written about the seriousness of the underachievement of gifted students, the perceptions of those labelled gifted underachievers themselves have not been explored.

A further contribution from Delisle and Berger (1990) in the debate around the conceptualisation of the phenomenon of underachievement was the distinction made between selective consumerism as a type of underachievement and conventional underachievement. They suggested that selective consumers choose not to perform; their performance or lack of it is in direct relation to both the content of what is being taught and the teacher, and as such performance fluctuates. Conventional underachievers, in contrast, exhibit chronic low performance, are dependent and do not show an understanding of the causes of their underachievement (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002). Delisle and Berger argued that different approaches should be employed for working with these two types of underachievers.

Other researchers have agreed with the conceptualisation of selective consumers (sometimes called situational consumers) as a type of underachievement (Clark, 2002; Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003; Matthews & Foster, 2009; Rimm, 2008). Australian researchers Figg et al. (2012) found that their results, although not statistically significant, supported the trend that selective consumers were qualitatively different from underachievers. Thus, there is support for a broader view of underachievement. The selective consumer concept aligns with the belief that underachievement does not always need to be viewed as a problem of the student. Peters (2012) pointed out that “the term underachievement in general carries with it an implied assumption that the area in which a student is not achieving is worth achieving in the first place” (p. 177).

Some students may choose to under-perform of their own volition in certain areas that they may not see as being valid for them. Matthews and Foster (2009) concurred with this when they noted that school work and attaining high marks may not be of most importance to a student at certain times. There are likely to be other things in a student's schooling life that are of greater interest, such as extra-curricular activities and negotiating a developing social identity.

Delisle and Galbraith (2002) recommended that the construct of underachievement should take on a personal interpretation by researchers. It should be defined carefully by each individual researcher to honour the very different students within each study. This preferred discourse is in contrast to the discrepancy definition based on set measurement criteria. Several other writers have suggested that in practical settings, such as a school based situation, fixed standards are not suitable and teachers who have been trained in gifted education may be the best judges of underachievement (Peters, Grager-Loidel, & Supplee, 2000). The knowledge of the teachers was the important point, as it was believed that this would alleviate any tendency to solely blame a student for their behaviour. An understanding of such issues as a student's interests outside of school, their strengths and weaknesses, and their communications with parents and past teachers would all serve to improve teacher judgements.

There has been discomfort from many writers with the term 'underachievement' in relation to gifted students, especially when it is used as a term that places the blame for the problem solely upon the students themselves. There is support for reframing the concept and for moving away from its negative connotations. A focus on looking at underachievement as a behaviour that can be changed and at individual contextual situations was preferred by Delisle and his colleagues, rather than continuing with "techniques to coerce 'underachieving' students into performing at levels that cause adults to smile" (Delisle, 1994, p. 1).

About the nature of research on achievement and underachievement

The more recent research on the achievement and underachievement of gifted and talented students can primarily be divided into two categories: studies that are

comparative and mainly quantitative, and studies that are about the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants, which are mainly qualitative.

Comparative studies

There has been a strong interest in the literature in designing quantitative studies that compare gifted achievers, or gifted high achievers, with gifted underachievers. An example of such research is the work of Colangelo et al. (1993), who compared a group of students who scored highly on standardised achievement tests but performed poorly in classroom activities with a second group of students who also had high achievement test scores but who had consistently high GPAs in high school course work. The first participants were not stereotypical underachievers, the researchers reasoned, as they were white, middle class students who planned to go to college, but they were nevertheless performing at low levels. Statistical analysis showed significant differences in the need for services between the two groups. The researchers hoped that the different profiles of the two groups studied would alert educators to the needs of the underachieving group. Ziegeler and Stoeger (2004) similarly compared achievers and underachievers, examining their motivational orientations with the premise that the promotion of a learning goal motivation is a sound intervention for underachievers. Further quantitative studies have also added to the comparative literature by differentiating between achievers and underachievers in an effort to determine if factors that led to high achievement could be used to motivate gifted underachievers (McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Peterson, 2000; Reis, 2007; Ruban & Reis, 2006).

In the Australian literature, the Wollongong Youth Study (Vialle et al., 2007), a longitudinal study of 950 adolescents from five high schools in New South Wales, Australia, separated their group of 60 gifted students into achievers and underachievers. Underachievers were those who scored in the bottom 50% in their school grades. The ‘underachievers’ demonstrated traits such as lower “joviality” (p. 575) and poorer attitudes to school. Figg et al. (2012) added a third group to the comparison when they compared gifted achieving, underachieving and selective consuming students in their Australian study, exploring differences between the three groups in academic self-perception and thinking style preferences. Although results showed no significant differences between selective consumers and underachieving

gifted students in academic self-perception, they did support findings from other studies that academic self-perception was higher for the selective consumers group (p. 67). In addition, the scores for academic self-perception for the selective consumers were much closer to those of the achievers group than to those of the underachievers. The focus of the comparative studies seems to have been on determining whether there were significant differences between behaviours that might lead to achievement and behaviours that might lead to underachievement.

Lived experiences

Schultz (2002b) maintained that the perceptions and reflections of gifted adolescents in particular had only been sparingly examined in the literature to date. In a recent doctoral study which looked at young Australian gifted adolescents' self-understanding, Dillon (2011b) described her participants as being from a group who rarely have the chance to put forward their personal views in any research. Schultz (2002b) summarised historical research approaches to gifted underachievement up to the beginning of the new millennium and concluded by advocating research which moves away "from the 'fix the broken' mentality of working *on* students, to one of working *with* students to develop understanding and learning" (p. 204). Over the last decade in particular, there has been a small growth in the number of studies which focus on the experiences and perceptions of gifted students themselves in terms of their achievement or underachievement.

An early study to approach the phenomenon of underachievement by privileging students' voices was that by Emerick (1992). Her premise was that despite much focus in the literature on gifted underachievement, there was limited research asking students directly about their own views on how to reverse the pattern. She interviewed 10 gifted adolescents who had once been underachievers about which factors had contributed to the reversal of their underachievement. Emerick felt it was important to understand "the meaning the individual attaches to achievement-oriented behaviours or to factors contributing to such behaviours" (p. 140).

Since Emerick's study, more researchers have embraced the idea of listening to student voice, and several have adopted a qualitative methodology when researching gifted underachievement (Balduf, 2009; Hebert, 2001; Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003;

Monceaux & Jewell, 2007; Peterson et al., 2009; Schultz, 2002a). For example, Pomerantz and Pomerantz's book (2002) was based on the conviction of the authors that any understandings about underachievement would be strengthened by listening to the views of the students, who might help to identify real possibilities for change in schools. The authors conducted a study with 26 adolescent able underachievers. Questions were asked about their relationships with teachers, parents, siblings and peers; about school and curricula; about personal and emotional needs; and about ideas for change and for the future. A study exploring the perceptions of gifted students who had chosen to disengage from learning in the classroom because of what they saw as inappropriate curricula – Delisle's selective consumers – highlighted the depth of feelings of the students and their reasons for choosing to drop out of school related experiences (Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003). The students were aged between 15–18 and all equated schooling with boredom. Hebert's (2001) study of gifted underachieving males similarly found that boredom was a factor in the reported school experiences from this group of six talented young men in urban classrooms. The youths reported that they found courses irrelevant and the lack of challenge led to behaviour issues and a tendency to be negatively influenced by peers.

Several studies on gifted underachievement have used a phenomenological approach in order to present a rich description of the experiences of the students. A comparative study using a qualitative, phenomenological methodology looked at achievers and underachievers in three schools in England (Lee-Corbin & Denicolo, 1998). The participants were children aged from 9–11 years, who were designated as achievers or underachievers according to criteria set by the researcher. A phenomenological case study approach was chosen as it was felt this allowed for the individual experiences of the participants to be interpreted. The views of teachers and parents were also sought. Models of achievers and underachievers were developed from the research, as well as suggestions for preventing underachievement. Peterson (2001), too, elected to conduct a phenomenological study, as she maintained that “the *experience* of underachievement, interactive aspects of underachievement, the connection between underachievement and development in gifted individuals ... have also received little attention” (p. 236). Her retrospective study, of successful adults who saw themselves as having been underachievers when they were adolescents, aimed to discover which factors might be related to the onset, maintenance and reversal of underachievement.

Adolescent high school students who had been identified as both gifted (on an IQ test or a standardised achievement test) and underachieving (2.75 GPA or below in science course work) were the participants in Schultz's (2002a) study which explored their perceptions and experiences as learners. This was a phenomenological case study with a focus on presenting the voices of the students as they described their struggles with identity and achievement decisions. Schultz purposely did not use the labels 'underachiever' or 'gifted' in any of his conversations with the students, preferring to let the students reflect on their own experiences in their own way. Australian researchers Luus and Watters (2012) focused on self-presentation strategies that were employed by some gifted and talented adolescents, within a case study approach. The tension between the construction of an adolescent identity and decisions about achievement and underachievement in school for these participants was explored.

Other studies, while not specifically focusing on the phenomena of achievement or underachievement, have asked gifted and talented students about their lived experiences of school. Academically gifted students' experiences of school within the particular socio-cultural milieu of a magnet school, or a specialised school for gifted students, were explored by Cross and colleagues (Cross, Stewart, & Coleman, 2003) in a phenomenological study. The participants described their feelings about being academic high achievers. Similarly, an Australian study looked at the lifeworlds of academically gifted adolescents who attended three different schools and found that social coping strategies impacted on achievement decisions (Eddles-Hirsch, Vialle, McCormick, & Rogers, 2012). Dillon (2011a) reported that her young participants were able to express their feelings about constructing identities as gifted and talented learners through online conversations with her, the researcher. This self-authoring, which was via emails with the researcher acting as an empathetic listener, enabled the participants to explore the 'who am I?' question in a supportive and reflective environment. Renold (2001) and Renold and Allan (2006), on girls, and Monceaux and Jewell (2007), on boys, focus on gender and the particular tensions for girls or boys as they negotiate their identities as high-achieving students in schools.

A common theme from all these qualitative studies was their aim to explore the lives of gifted students as they experienced their schooling and to include their voices in a

collaborative way in any findings from the studies. Researchers were aware that “the rich student narrative provided an important window into the inner, subjective world of gifted students” (Peterson et al., 2009, p. 38).

Profiles of achievers and underachievers

Some writers have used qualitative research, such as case studies, to develop what have been variously labelled ‘profiles,’ ‘types’ or ‘models’ of achievers and underachievers. These profiles focus on the behaviours and experiences of gifted and talented students as observed and interpreted by the researchers. Heacox’s (1991) profiles of underachieving gifted students listed the rebel, the conformist, the perfectionist, the struggling student, the victim, the distracted learner, the bored student, the complacent learner and the single-sided achiever as categories. Explanatory behaviours were attached to each category. Rimm (1995) emphasised that gifted underachievers are individuals but hypothesised that they could be fitted into prototypical categories. She developed names for these categories, again aligning them with specific behaviours. These were the perfectionist underachiever, the passive underachiever, the sick underachiever, the taunted underachiever, the torn underachiever, the social underachiever, the academic underachiever, the manipulative underachiever, the creative underachiever, the rebellious underachiever, the hyperactive underachiever and the bullying underachiever. Rimm did make the point that it is unlikely that any one child is purely a representation of just one of these categories but would more likely be a blend of one or more prototypes.

The *Profiles of the Gifted and Talented* developed and then revised by Neihart and Betts (2010) are recommended as a tool for teachers to use for identification purposes (Ministry of Education, 2012a). These included two profiles which align with underachieving behaviours: ‘The Underground Gifted’ and ‘The At-Risk Gifted.’ Characteristics of ‘The Underground’ profile included being uninterested in achievement and showing a preference to belong socially over performing well at school tasks. The profile of the ‘At-Risk’ student highlighted unrealistic expectations, a student not motivated by teacher rewards and one who has low academic achievement and inconsistent work habits at school.

Researchers conducting qualitative empirical studies have devised models representing achievers and underachievers, which have emerged from their data. Four cases showing examples of how a model of an achieving student and an underachieving student might look were presented by Lee-Corbin and Denicolo (1998), while Peterson (2001) described the profile of an underachieving adolescent which evolved from the major themes during analysis of her data.

The attempts by some researchers to categorise achievers and underachievers appears to be an extension of the continuing need to more clearly understand the enigma of underachievement for gifted and talented learners.

A review of the New Zealand literature on achievement and underachievement

Research in the field of gifted and talented education in New Zealand is a growing phenomenon with an increasing number of postgraduate students and a small group of academics leading the research. Despite this positive trend, I was unable to find published empirical studies carried out in New Zealand that have focused specifically on understandings of achievement and underachievement for gifted and talented students.

However, the seminal text for educators in the field in New Zealand (Moltzen, 2011d) does contain a chapter which includes a review of some research on underachievement in gifted students (Moltzen, 2011c). The chapter explores definitions and characteristics of underachievement and discusses some causes, identification issues and ideas for remediation. Although the chapter's author, Moltzen, has attempted to relate the issues to a New Zealand school situation, the references are, of necessity, to the international literature (with a few exceptions, such as when he refers to culturally diverse gifted and talented students).

New Zealand author Gallagher (2005) provided a review of the literature on the underachievement of gifted and talented students. She noted that most writers used the discrepancy definition but alluded to the difficulties of basing a definition on potential when this is not easily measured. She discussed the subjective judgements on which standards of both achievement and underachievement are made and the perceived

expectations of those who label a gifted student an underachiever. Gallagher did make the point, which Moltzen also alluded to, that the “construct of achievement (and therefore underachievement) differs from culture to culture” (p. 2). This seems to be something that is aligned with a particular New Zealand milieu, in that an awareness of cultural differences has become an important part of New Zealand educational philosophy. Gallagher’s review contained no references from New Zealand authors.

King (2009) completed a Master’s thesis looking at gifted and talented students from a New Zealand high school, who were classified as high achievers, achievers and underachievers, based on examination results and teacher judgements. The focus of King’s study was the link between achievement and resilience. He was interested in how the students coped with failure. The students were not asked about their own understandings of achievement or underachievement per se, but perceptions of what the notions of ‘success’ and ‘failure’ meant to them were explored.

A magazine article in the New Zealand Association for Gifted Children’s *Tall Poppies* by psychologist Lynn Berresford (2003) explored the phenomenon of gifted underachievement. However, this article, too, talked about “research done in America” (p. 8). Berresford alerted parents to the vulnerabilities of gifted students who underachieve and suggested parents and teachers should reclaim the underachiever by trying to understand the reasons for underachievement and then effect positive change. She acknowledged that there is no unanimous agreement among researchers of either giftedness or underachievement as concepts.

The above summary reflects the paucity of the literature by New Zealand writers that is currently available on underachievement in gifted and talented students. With no studies having been carried out in a New Zealand school situation which specifically explore the meaning of the phenomenon of underachievement, it is not possible for writers to refer to underachievement in the New Zealand context. Thus, any writing from New Zealand is presented as a general summary of the international literature on underachievement. The issues that surround the recognition of Maori and Pasifika conceptions of giftedness are alluded to by Moltzen (2011c) and possible links to underachievement for this group of gifted and talented learners are made. It could be interpreted that New Zealand understandings about underachievement for gifted and

talented students are similar to those represented in the international literature, but it is difficult to draw conclusions that may be specific to this country.

It is worth noting that an extensive, longitudinal New Zealand study was carried out by David Keen and published in 2005. This work aimed to give a snapshot of the perceptions about gifted education held by gifted and talented students, teachers and parents. As a parallel to this current study, part of the research involved case studies of 11 gifted and talented adolescents who were followed over a period of five months. Although Keen's (2005) study was focused on gifted education practice, it did explore the students' thoughts about their experiences of school as gifted young people. The study found that the majority of the participants enjoyed school in the main, but issues of anxiety, peer pressure and a lack of challenge were common and underachievement could result. However, the research did not appear to specifically ask the gifted and talented students their understandings about what giftedness meant or about definitions of achievement and underachievement. Case-study profiles were developed which were drawn from the data collected about the 11 cases. Keen attached what he called "qualities and conditions" (p. 208) to these case studies, which included socialites, loners, broad spectrum high achievers, rebels, conservatives and dilettantes.

A small-scale study by Townsend and Kirby (2005) asked a group of pre-adolescent New Zealand children who were academically gifted and talented about their perceptions of their schooling experiences. These researchers did ask their participants their views around the concept of giftedness and if they thought there were any issues related to being gifted learners in school. Horsley (2009) studied a cohort of New Zealand academically high-achieving students to explore factors which influenced their success. Neither of these two studies explored the students' own understandings of what achievement or underachievement meant to them.

Ideas from the 'popular understandings' literature

In contrast to the empirical literature, understandings about achievement for gifted students have been discussed in depth in what I would term the 'popular understandings' work that is common in New Zealand. A particular focus has been on ideas of cultural differences. Literature from several New Zealand magazine and

newspaper articles has presented a socio-cultural view of achievement which represents a dominant assumption in Western society, that Western gifted and talented students relate achievement to innate abilities (Anyan, 2012; Black, 2007; Chisholm, 2010; Claridge, 2005; Laugesen, 2011). From a socio-cultural perspective, it is interesting that these authors contrasted this observation with the belief that Asian students attribute achievement solely to hard work. For example, recent articles in the media in New Zealand (as referenced above) have tended to confirm these discursive notions of the superior Asian work ethic along with the idea that “western societies consider that aptitude makes the difference” (Black, 2007, p.16). Controversy over author Amy Chua’s book *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, which outlined the parenting style of a Chinese American mother, illustrated what is seen to be a sharp contrast to that of Western American parents (Paul, 2011). Chua unashamedly advocated achievement-oriented parenting and subjected her own children to what was seen as a harsh regime of constant practice in order to have them achieve at the very highest levels. She saw Western parental views on achievement as being about asking children to do their best but not expecting them to be resilient or tough enough to put in the kind of effort expected of Chinese children because of constant parental concerns about children’s self-esteem. Chua maintained that “Westerners often laud their children as ‘talented’ or ‘gifted’ ... while Asian parents highlight the importance of hard work” (Paul, 2011, p. 27).

The debate over Chua’s views, as a parent, on achievement was seen as interesting enough to New Zealanders for it to be given space as a main article in the *New Zealand Listener* in 2011 (Laugeson, 2011). This was in an article which questioned New Zealand parents’ attitudes to achievement for their children. Within the article, New Zealand academic John Hattie recommended that parents tell their children that it is hard work and effort that is the key to success, not just innate ability, espousing a different view from that presented in this popular literature.

Chapter summary

This background to the study has identified the complexities of understandings about giftedness and achievement that exist in this field. It seeks to emphasise that many different discourses around giftedness and talent, and achievement and

underachievement are presented in the literature. Gee (1990) described discourses as being about the ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing and speaking that particular groups accept as being 'right' within their particular social milieu. He viewed a discourse as a social and political process whereby "certain combinations get recognised in certain ways and not others" (Gee, 2000, p. 111). I have endeavoured to summarise some key debates around the phenomena of interest for this thesis and show how understandings of what it means to be gifted and talented, or to be gifted and achieving or underachieving, can be framed within a variety of discourses, both in the international research and in the New Zealand literature.

The discussions on historical conceptions of giftedness and on the varying debates that exist currently about the construct illustrate how different paradigms around gifted education have shaped the understandings that educators and researchers have about the notion of giftedness. It is these theories that influence the pedagogical decisions made about gifted education as a whole, and it is thus important to explore the nature of conceptual shifts in the field. The thesis has a socio-cultural framework in the selection of the concept of giftedness used for the study. This necessitates an understanding of historical contexts that have influenced these ideas, both in an international context and within the New Zealand socio-cultural milieu. Although the international research does have some pertinence for New Zealand, the need for more in-depth exploration of understandings about experiences of being gifted and talented in a New Zealand school situation is supported by the dearth of research in this area.

Several studies looking at underachievement in gifted and talented learners have compared achievers and underachievers, using quantitative methods. There has been a recent trend in the international literature towards studies that aim to explore the experiences of achieving and underachieving gifted students and listen to their views. However, in my review for the background to this thesis, I was unable to find published studies that focused specifically on the understandings that gifted and talented students in New Zealand schools had about the phenomena of achievement and underachievement. By paying attention to the voices of a group of young gifted adolescents, and those of their parents and teachers, this study attempts to redress this

gap in the literature and to put the diverse experiences of these learners within the particular cultures of their schools at the centre.

The following two chapters describe the qualitative, phenomenological approach adopted for the research and the way in which the study was conducted.

Chapter Three:

The ‘Methodological Umbrella’

Methodology is the overarching philosophical framework that shapes research design, data collection, analysis and knowledge construction.
(Somekh, 2009, July)

Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological influences that have guided decisions about this research. In doing so, it reflects agreement with the position taken by Somekh, above. The chapter describes my understanding around methodology and the knowledge claim that influenced research decisions. The chapter outlines the theoretical influences that have underpinned the process of the research, with a particular focus on phenomenology. It then moves on to an explanation of both the strategies of inquiry and the tools of inquiry that were chosen within the qualitative research design of the thesis. Considerations about ethics, as well as rigour and trustworthiness in qualitative research, are addressed in this chapter.

Methodology is conceptualised as the primary focus that ‘arches’ over all other parts of the research in an umbrella-like way. Methodology is not simply about how we do research. It is the justification for deciding to carry out the research in the chosen way (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012). A researcher begins by seeking to give good reason for selecting a particular phenomenon to research and then must further defend the process of the research itself as valid and appropriate. Both philosophical and theoretical reasons and the more practical decisions about the design of the research must be substantiated in order to represent a strong methodology (Creswell, 2003). Methodology permeates the whole project, from the relationship between research questions and literature review, and between data collection and data analysis. In making selection decisions and in justifying these selections one should endeavour to remain “methodologically self-conscious” (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012, p. 39). A good methodology needs to show that going about the study in this chosen way is sustainable because of the context and aims of this particular research.

Further, the approach to methodology for this specific study was influenced by the idea of methodological flexibility supported by Miles and Huberman (1994):

To us it seems clear that research is actually more a craft than a slavish adherence to methodological rules. No study conforms exactly to a standard methodology; each one calls for the researcher to bend the methodology to the peculiarities of the setting. (p. 5)

Methodology is about purpose (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005a; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The purpose of my study was to explore the lived experiences of a group of individuals and the methodology would evolve and ‘bend’ in response to the ways that the participants responded to this research project. The contextual nature of my research meant that being methodologically self-conscious throughout the research process was of prime importance.

Contemplating my world view

Any framework that researchers choose when beginning a research project is influenced by the world view that they have developed through their own experiences and how they live their lives because of this view (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005a; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Sandalowski, 2003). One’s own philosophical foundations are integral to the methodological structure (van Manen, 1990).

Creswell (2003) uses the term “knowledge claim” (p. 5) to describe the theoretical positions of researchers, and states that at the beginning of any research we should be aware which knowledge claim is guiding the assumptions we hold about the way individuals learn. A researcher brings certain assumptions about ontology (what is the nature of reality) and epistemology (how we come to know what we know) to the research and these views impact on the process for studying knowledge about the world (methodology). We cannot separate our ‘way of seeing the world’ (Somekh & Lewin, 2005), which is our own personal philosophy, from any methodological decisions we make about research. Our personal values inform any moral or ethical decisions we make in response to challenges in the course of the study.

Interpretivist knowledge claim

This research is grounded in an interpretivist knowledge claim. This view holds that no single interpretation from any one person can be seen as the ‘truth’ as there are multiple and

subjective ways of making sense of any experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005a). Denzin and Lincoln maintain that a qualitative researcher's approach to research is necessarily interpretative because it is guided by his or her own beliefs and feelings about the world and the ways he or she thinks a phenomenon of interest might be studied. Interpretivism is an "attempt to interpret human behaviour in terms of the meanings assigned to it by the actors themselves" (Geering, 2007, p. 214). Interpretivists argue that researchers cannot be detached from a field of inquiry any more than their participants can because as they begin an inquiry researchers too are socially and culturally placed within a particular setting and hold their own conceptual beliefs (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researcher, too, is an 'actor' involved in the study. This interpretative knowledge claim, representing what Sandalowski (2003) calls an overarching world view and belief system, influenced the theoretical perspectives of constructivism and phenomenology that I drew upon for this project. Further, this knowledge claim and the theoretical perspectives underpinning the claim align naturally with a qualitative approach; strategies and tools of inquiry were chosen in line with this thinking. Figure 1 summarises the methodological decisions made. Specific decisions about the research are elaborated later in this chapter.

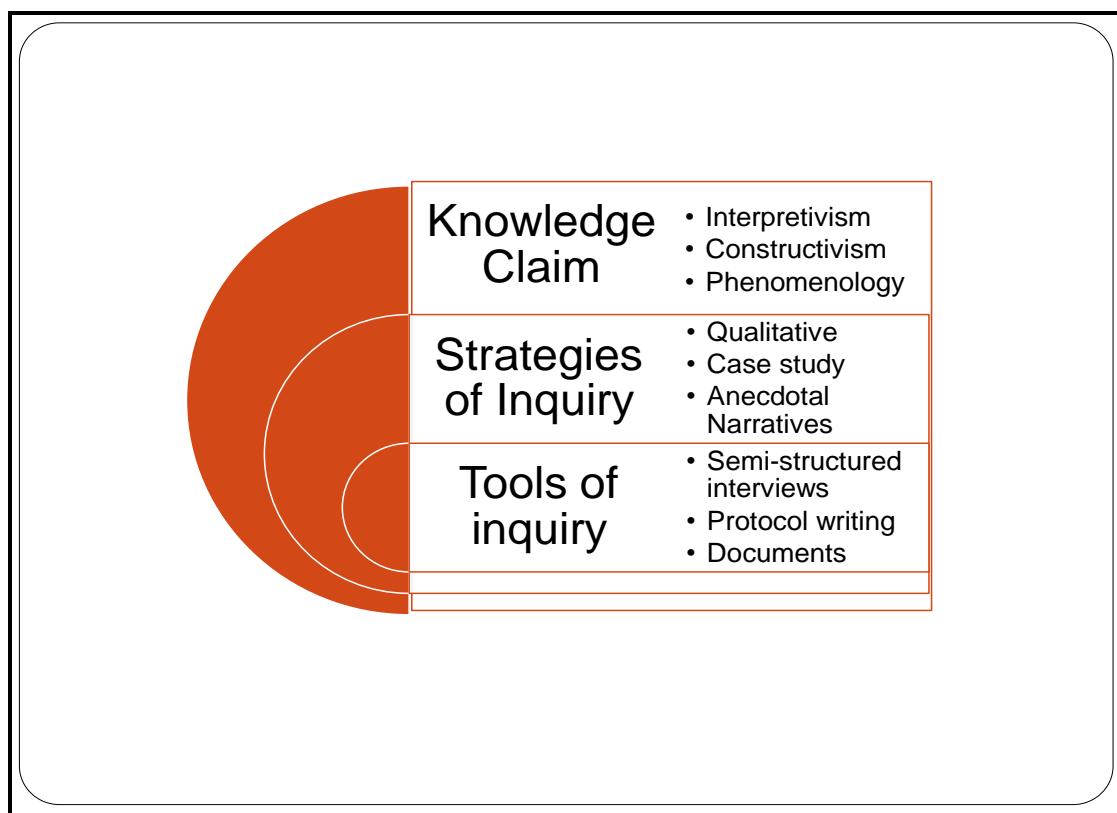


Figure 1: The methodological outline for this thesis.

Theoretical influences

The key theoretical influences that led to the decisions I made as a researcher in relation to this study were constructivism and phenomenology.

The influence of constructivism

Underpinning a constructivist position is the belief that human perceptions and understandings are shaped by social, cultural and linguistic constructs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005a; Mutch, 2005; Patton, 2002). The ontological view of constructivism is relativist; there are multiple realities for every phenomenon that are local and specific (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Patton (2002) states succinctly that constructivists “study the multiple realities constructed by people and the implications of those constructions for their lives and interactions” (p. 96). This is a clear articulation of the aims of this study. Creswell (2003) notes that constructivism is often combined with interpretivism. Not only is it concerned with a focus on how people find meaning through their interpretation of the world but researchers working from a constructivist theoretical base also understand that their own interpretation is influenced by their particular personal, cultural and historical experiences.

A constructivist voice is that of the researcher as a “passionate participant” (Guba & Lincoln, 2005), one who co-constructs realities alongside the study participants. In turn, the findings are a further reconstruction – an interpretative process carried out by the researcher in an effort to describe consensus and interpret the joint construction. A constructivist position requires a researcher to display an empathy with the participants, and to ensure that their interests and principles are integral to any interpretation of findings (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003).

There are complexities within a constructivist approach, however. Although a community consensus may be the aim of a constructivist inquiry (as Guba and Lincoln, 2005, in particular, advocate) one should not ignore the unique or rather the competing constructions that may be the views of some participants. If one is to adhere to the view that there are multiple truths or realities then there must be a place for the unique and divergent findings that could lead to new interpretations and develop understandings, as well as consensus. In response to this challenge, I was concerned not only with representing a consensus of meaning-making around the

phenomenon of interest for my study but to also acknowledge the diversity of views that may be outside this consensus. This position influenced the process of analysis of the findings for this study.

I use the term *constructivist-interpretative* to describe this theoretical influence, taking the idea from the work of Guba and Lincoln (2005) and Patton (2002). The term represents, for me, the ideas that my participants' understandings and experiences are cognitively constructed but are also inextricably linked to their culture and their social context; my understandings as the researcher are socially constructed through my own cultural framework, and the interpretations I make of the participants' ideas and experiences are negotiated through the interactions with the participants.

Phenomenology explored

Phenomenology developed as both the key theoretical perspective and as a research approach (Creswell, 2007) in the early stages of the study. Phenomenology fitted with my knowledge claim in that a phenomenological approach is an interpretative process. The word phenomenon is derived from a Greek word, *phaenesthai*, meaning to flare up, to show itself, or to bring to light (Moustakas, 1994). The intention of this research is to bring to light and to make sense of human experiences, specifically the experiences of gifted and talented students. However, definitions around what is meant by the term phenomenology as a social science approach have become many and varied. Phenomenology was first used to describe a philosophical tradition in the work of the German philosophers Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger (Patton, 2002). Over time it has also been used to refer to “an inquiry paradigm, an interpretative therapy, a social science analytical perspective or orientation, a major qualitative tradition or a research methods framework” (p. 104). Three different branches of phenomenology have developed – transcendental, hermeneutic and existential.

For this thesis, I have chosen to be guided by van Manen's (1990) phenomenological research approach, which he tends to label “hermeneutic phenomenology” (p. 180). Heidegger is often associated with the school of *hermeneutic phenomenology* (Smith et al., 2009) which emphasises that research should be about the interpretation of human experience through some kind of text. It is the text that presents us with the

description of lived experience. A process of reflective interpretation of this text is then needed in order to bring some kind of deeper understanding (Ehrich, 2003; Moustakas, 1994). Heidegger's view on phenomenology was based on his belief that human science research should be about what it means to be a human being (Danaher & Briod, 2005). Van Manen (1990) believes that we can include both a descriptive and an interpretative (hermeneutic) element to phenomenology and he uses the terms more or less interchangeably. For him hermeneutic phenomenology includes both the descriptive and the interpretative elements.

The central purpose of my study was to explore the *lived experiences* of a group of gifted and talented adolescents during their school years. More specifically I aimed to find out what they saw as the *essence* of the *meanings* around the phenomena of achievement and underachievement. Phenomenology brings a perspective that matched these aims. Van Manen (1990) highlights this focus on experiences and meaning when he states that:

The point of phenomenological research is to borrow other people's experiences and their reflections on their experiences in order to better able to come to an understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience, in the context of the whole of human experience. (p. 62)

Phenomenological researchers align with the constructivist idea that uniqueness is as important as commonality (van Manen, 1990). Unlike other research perspectives phenomenology is not about seeking to generalise about human experience which may in fact serve to prevent us from learning from the uniqueness of any human experience. Van Manen (1990) argues that "what we need more of, is theory not consisting of generalisations, which we then have difficulty applying to concrete and ever-changing circumstances, but the *theory of the unique*" [author's italics] (p. 155). He sees that it is the intimate relationship between research and a real life experience that is of importance. Theory should be about a particular pedagogic situation involving a particular school, child or group of students. Phenomenology is not about facts that lead to an absolute or perceived truth (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990).

The thinking behind a phenomenological approach couched this way matched the aims of this study. From the beginnings of this project it was important to me to

represent the uniqueness and idiosyncrasies of the young people I was relying on to share their experiences. For my study, I did not want to problem solve as such; I did not intend the thesis to be about interventions or solutions for gifted and talented students. I was not setting out to prove that one method of working with these students was more effective than another. I wanted to share a reflective understanding about the particular lived experiences of these gifted and talented adolescents and of the meanings that they have constructed over time about the concepts of achievement and underachievement.

Phenomenology characterises itself as exploring the “thoughtfulness” around a given phenomenon. Van Manen calls this “the ministering of thoughtfulness” (1990, p. 12). Methodologically, I agree with van Manen (1990) and Ehrich (2003) when they maintain that one of the purposes of human science research should be to critically influence pedagogical competence and thus to go towards fulfilling our responsibilities as educators and mentors in the lives of students.

Phenomenological research does not attempt to generate specific theories or to design models but rather seeks to raise awareness and broaden insight into the phenomenon of interest for the purpose of clarification (Ehrich, 2003; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). This approach proved to be the critical influence that shaped the design of this study. Phenomenology fitted both with my thinking around ontology and epistemology and from a research design perspective.

Phenomenology– lived experiences, essence and meaning

The application of van Manen’s (1990) ideas about phenomenology fitted with the purpose of my research. His emphasis on a human science methodology that serves the practical aims of pedagogy resonated with my aims to explore the lived experiences of my participants in the hope that the findings may have some impact on the pedagogical competence of educators working with gifted and talented students in New Zealand schools. Further, Ehrich (2003) considers that van Manen’s “contribution to phenomenology has been felt not only in advancing the methodology of phenomenology, but also in the strong moral message underscored in his work, which reminds us of our humanness in everyday life” (p. 65).

I identified three central elements of the hermeneutic, phenomenological approach espoused by van Manen (1990). These are lived experience, essence and meanings. These three elements of ‘humanness’ were to the forefront of my thinking as I conducted my study. This thesis uses the terms *lived experiences*, *essence* and *meanings* frequently in their phenomenological sense.

Phenomenology is about *lived experiences*. Phenomenological inquiry is not governed by factual knowledge about an event such as how often an experience occurred or how long it went on but it is about the nature of that experience, about how an event was interpreted by the people experiencing it. Such an inquiry is focused on the newness, the “freshness and whole cloth of lived experience” (Danaher & Briod, 2005, p. 219). It involves the kind of thinking that ensures one does not rely solely on abstract theory but brings the reality of lived experiences, of students, of schools, of teachers, to the fore (van Manen, 1990). Van Manen reminds us that this existential focus—lived experience—is at the centre of all phenomenological inquiry. He believes that:

Lived experience is the starting point and end point of phenomenological research. The aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essences – in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflective re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience. (p. 36)

Phenomenological research is reflective and as such is retrospective. One cannot reflect on an experience while one is living through it, so understandings about lived experience are interpreted through the retrospective reflections of those who have lived them. Van Manen (1990) includes the experiences of significant others to help to bring the phenomenon to light, which brings further retrospection as these others reflect on their understanding of the experiences of the participant.

Each piece of phenomenological research is ultimately the interpretation of one person, the researcher, who sets out to bring understanding to a certain aspect of lived experience. In this respect, a phenomenological research inquiry needs to be ‘lived’ by the researcher as well. This brings challenges for a phenomenological researcher. Phenomenology as a process of human science research is premised on the

understanding that the entrance into any such research is inevitably through one's personal interest and passion, rather than through more removed, purely scientific wonderings. Husserl believed that a researcher needed to bracket out any individual biases and to simply experience the life-world of everyday living (Ehrich, 2003; Giles, 2008). Heidegger, among many, saw this absolute 'bracketing' as being unrealistic (Ehrich, 2003; Smith et al., 2009). Researchers will naturally enter the research field with biases and indeed with enthusiasm and interest about the phenomenon being studied, usually because of their own experiences. Some bracketing or setting aside of pre-conceived notions is important, but one's own experience can be channelled to encourage a deeper meaning.

In my position as a phenomenological researcher I was bringing my own lived experience to this study. I had observed, contributed to and shared in the life of my daughter, and her experiences of schooling in New Zealand. The existential focus I brought with me to this study needed to be made explicit but any knowledge, assumptions and understandings that I had could not be put aside completely.

Phenomenology is about *essence*. The approach is based on the belief that there is a central essence or essences to any lived experience. Patton (2002) states that these "essences are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced" (p. 106). They are the thematic descriptions derived from the concrete examples of life, that have been described by several participants; they are the shared experiences that are bracketed together to answer the kinds of questions that a hermeneutic phenomenologist would ask (Danaher & Briod, 2005). "What is this like? What is the nature or essence of this particular experience? In what way is this experience significant? What is the meaning behind it; how does it make sense?" Van Manen (1990) describes it this way:

The term essence may be understood as a linguistic construction, a description of a phenomenon. A good description that constitutes the essences of something is construed so that the structure of a lived experience is revealed to us in such a fashion that we are now able to grasp the nature and significance of this experience in a hitherto unseen way. (p. 39)

Van Manen (1990) contends that phenomenological research is unlike other kinds of research in that it distinguishes between appearance and essence. It aims to bring to

our understanding that which is obscure about our everyday life experiences, as a thoughtful reflection on the real nature of a phenomenon.

Phenomenology is about *meaning*. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach not only sets out to describe the words and actions of lived experiences but the emotions and sensitivities that might provide a richer description of the meaning behind the experience for the participant. Such an inquiry is not looking merely for what was said or what happened but for “nuanced qualities” that might lead to key meanings in an experience (Danaher & Briod, 2005, p. 230). Van Manen (1990) emphasises that the meaning or essences of a phenomenon of interest is always multi-layered and multi-dimensional. In contrast to what he calls “problem questions,” van Manen asserts that phenomenological questions are meaning questions which cannot be “solved.” Meaning questions lead one towards a more in-depth understanding so that perhaps one can “act more thoughtfully and more tactfully in certain situations” (p. 23).

To makes sense of lived experience one must reflectively analyse the textual description of the experience. Searching for a thematic understanding of a particular lived experience involves “insightful invention, discovery or disclosure” (van Manen, 1990, p. 79) and is not a procedure bound by set rules but one that is concerned with the overriding desire to seek meaning in whatever way possible. A fuller description of the practice of developing meaning units is given in the explanation of the thematic analysis used in the study.

In summary, van Manen (1990) describes his view on the process of phenomenological research by stating that “the insight into the essence of a phenomenon involves a process of reflectively appropriating, of clarifying, and of making explicit the structure of meaning of lived experience” (p. 76). It is such a description of the process of phenomenological inquiry that led me to select this specific theoretical perspective for my study. In addition, the key influences of constructivist-interpretivism and phenomenology are consistent with each other and these became the major theoretical influences that guided the study.

Moving from the philosophical and theoretical to strategies and tools.

The purpose of collecting and analysing the data for this study was framed within the phenomenological sense of reflecting on the experiences of others: students who were experiencing what it was like being gifted and talented adolescents in New Zealand schools. In the following sections, I outline how I went about the collection and analysis of the data within a qualitative research design. Specifically, I describe the processes employed to recruit the key participants for the study. I introduce the reader to the diverse group of adolescents who make up the ‘heart’ of this study. I explain in detail the methods used to collect the data over the 18 month period. Ethical issues that were considered are presented; some ethical dilemmas that arose during the study, and the ways in which I responded to these, are reflected upon. The methods of analysis used for this research in line with a qualitative, phenomenological approach are summarised and justified. Finally, processes to ensure trustworthiness are explained.

A qualitative research approach

This doctoral research project is firmly located under a qualitative methodological umbrella. Keeping with this metaphor and borrowing from Merriam (1998) the project fits within this design because “qualitative research is an umbrella concept covering several forms of inquiry that help us understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption to the natural setting as possible” (p. 5). This approach fitted with my knowledge claim and theoretical perspectives for the study.

Qualitative researchers are interested in naturally occurring, ordinary events which happen in real life situations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Punch, 2009). Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that qualitative researchers are looking to provide “thick descriptions” that are contextual and reflect the social world of the participants. A qualitative researcher aims to delve into the perceptions of participants ‘from the inside’ through deep understanding (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

A main focus for qualitative research is to illuminate the ways in which people in everyday situations make sense of particular phenomena. The findings of a qualitative study are intended for those who need to know about the stories, the experiences and the perceptions of the participants rather than about the ‘numbers’ as in how many, for how long, or how it can be measured (Patton, 2002). I was interested in how these unique participants made sense of their experiences and hoped that these findings might deepen understanding for educators and other professionals.

In qualitative designs the researcher is the main tool of the research. The “biographically situated researcher” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b, p. 21) is very much part of both the data collection process and the analysis. As the sole interviewer and as the person who would be interpreting the results for this research I would act as the main instrument in this study. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005a) the qualitative researcher can be seen as a kind of “interpretative bricoleur” (p. 4); that is, someone who seeks to piece together a set of representations around a multifaceted phenomenon. In doing so, the qualitative researcher has licence to use a variety of strategies, tools and methods to achieve this aim. “If the researcher needs to invent, or piece together, new tools or techniques, he or she will do so. Choices regarding which interpretative practices to employ are not necessarily made in advance” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b, p. 4). These choices of research practice depend on the context of the study and the opportunities that the researcher has within particular settings; this is the acceptance of methodological flexibility that was discussed earlier in this chapter.

Finally, qualitative research brings “an inductive orientation to analysis and findings that are truly descriptive” (Merriam, 1998, p. 11). Analysis is interpretative and primarily conducted using words. This kind of research recognises the importance of language and of the conversational interactions that occur during data collection. Describing and interpreting the active and social talk of the participants was a focus of my research.

The research questions decided upon for this study, the context in which data would be collected and analysed, the intention to collect comprehensive data over a long period of time coupled with the overriding purpose of the project led to the decision to place my research under the qualitative research design umbrella.

Strategies of inquiry

According to van Manen (1990) there are six steps that make up the research activity in a hermeneutic phenomenological study. These are paraphrased here:

1. Selecting a phenomenon that is of personal value and interest
2. Exploring real lived experience rather than conceptualising such experience
3. Reflecting on the essence of that experience through major themes
4. Describing the phenomenon by interpretations expressed through writing
5. Ensuring that a strong pedagogical link to the phenomenon is maintained
6. Providing balance to the context of the research by interpreting parts of the data as well as the whole. (pp. 30–31)

I used these six steps to guide the design and conduct of the study.

Case study design

Case study as a strategy of inquiry was seen as appropriate for a study that was positioned under a phenomenological framework, and which sought to generate rich description and bring to light the experiences of a small number of participants. Merriam (1998) believes one of the strengths of a case study approach is that “it offers insights and illuminates meanings” (p. 41). The goal of this research was to offer insights into the lived experiences of several gifted and talented adolescents and to explore the meaning of the phenomena of achievement and underachievement as understood by these adolescents. This essentially qualitative approach focuses on understanding a case or cases in-depth and on studying the complexities of cases in natural settings and within situational contexts (Punch, 2009).

A case study design has an interpretative base (Mutch, 2005; van Manen, 1990). In essence, the focus of a case study approach is on the ‘thick description’ of particular cases. In order to achieve the goal of thick description, case studies go even further than descriptive ethnographic studies by providing ‘stories’ as relayed to the

researcher by the participants that explore the deeper meaning structures behind the phenomenon being studied (van Manen, 1990, p. 178).

Yin (2003) provides what he calls a “technical definition” of a case study:

A case study is an empirical inquiry that [author’s italics]

- investigates a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context, especially when
- the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. (p. 13)

Contextual conditions are highly relevant when exploring particular phenomena. In order to provide in-depth exploration, case studies are more appropriate than, for example, other strategies in which a situation may be controlled or in which the chance to ask about context is limited. Yin (2003) and Patton (2002) note that case studies can employ multiple sources of evidence, making use of a variety of procedures such as interviews, participant observation, field studies and journal writing. Yin believes that choosing a theoretical perspective to help guide data collection and analysis is useful for such a strategy. A case study strategy is a “comprehensive research strategy” encompassing theoretical views, data collection methods and a specific approach to analysis (Yin, 2003, p. 14). Punch (2009) emphasises the “holistic focus” of the approach (p. 119).

Several authors advise that the case itself is firstly a thing, a unit, and that this unit needs to be bounded within certain, feasible limits for the purpose of the study (Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Punch, 2009; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2003). Miles and Huberman (1994) define a case as a “phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context” (p. 25). Each case could be bounded, for example, in terms of the number of people involved, the common characteristics of the participants, the time allowed for data collection, the geographic area selected, or the significant others who may be interviewed about the case. Miles and Huberman (1994) use the metaphor of a ‘heart’ as being the focus of the exploration whether this ‘heart’ is an individual, a small group, a role or an organisation or community. The bounding of the case will be structured around the ‘heart.’ The researcher must define the inside

and the outside of each case (Stake, 2006). Although a case does need to be treated as a single bounded unit, some cases may have other sub cases embedded within them, particularly if the case being studied is that of a group or community.

In addition, Merriam (1998) describes case studies as particularistic, descriptive and heuristic. This research study was influenced by these characteristics of qualitative case studies. It is particularistic in that the study focuses on particular phenomena of interest and on how each case may reveal significant factors that could be relevant for our understanding of the phenomena. In this study, I aimed to investigate the meaning of achievement and underachievement for gifted and talented learners. The study is descriptive as it endeavours to attain the ‘thick description’ which will provide the deeper meaning about what it is like for these students being gifted and talented. The thick description is aided by the longitudinal nature of this study and the use of perspectives from different groups – parents and teachers as well as the students. Finally, the case study has a heuristic element as the aim is that the case study descriptions will illuminate understandings of the phenomena being explored, as themes and patterns emerge. Geering (2007) contends that the purpose of an intensive case study is to shed light on a particular population. What kind of re-thinking or insight into the experiences of school and particularly into the phenomena of achievement and underachievement for gifted learners can be gained from the stories of the participants?

Collective case studies

This study has at its heart the 11 student participants who agreed to take part for a period of 18 months. Informing the stories of their school experiences as gifted and talented learners are the contributing stories that were told to me by their parents and two of their teachers. Although each of the 11 students could be seen as a single case, the approach used here is more specifically that of a collective case study (Chmiliar, 2009; Patton, 2002; Stake, 2005). A collective case study approach enables research around a number of similarly bounded cases in order to build a more detailed understanding of an issue (Chmiliar, 2009). I was interested in studying a particular group of individuals in order to investigate the essence of a general phenomenon. Individual cases, who shared common characteristics or who were “categorically bound together” (Stake, 2006, p. 6), were chosen because it was thought that an

understanding of the experiences of each of these would throw light on the phenomena of interest.

Yin (2003), among others (Chmiliar, 2009; Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Stake, 2006) argues that collective or multiple case studies (as they are also termed) provide more persuasive evidence and help to rebut the criticism of a lack of generalisability that is often directed at the case study approach. It can also be argued that collective case studies, and this would apply for this research, offer the chance for more in-depth understanding – the thick description for which we are aiming. Stake (2006) does warn that if “a study is designed as a qualitative multi-case study, then the individual cases should be studied to learn about their self-centering, complexity and situational uniqueness” (p. 6). Stake contends that there can be a procedural and an epistemological dilemma in deciding whether to focus more on the single case or on the collective cases. What is most important for understanding? Where should we focus our attention – on the part or the whole? In this study my interest was in the idiosyncratic lived experiences of the participants but also, in the phenomenological sense, on providing insight and ‘thoughtfulness’ about the phenomena of achievement and underachievement for gifted and talented learners. More broadly, my challenge, therefore, would be to interpret and describe both the unique and the consensus through a collective case study research design.

Anecdotal narrative inquiry

Within and alongside the case study method chosen for this study, there is also an element of anecdotal narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry is characterised as a type of qualitative inquiry that focuses on an interest in capturing the life stories of those who have lived them in order to make sense of the world (Chase, 2005; Creswell, 2003; Punch, 2009). A narrative as told to the researcher is retrospective and is a way of ordering lived experiences and shaping these into a meaningful whole. Each story can emphasise the uniqueness of what happened and involves emotions and individual interpretations (Chase, 2005). A narrative may describe a particular event, or a part of one’s life such as schooling or work or a biographical history of a person’s whole life. For this study, the emphasis was more on the aspect of schooling for my participants as they lived through the experience of being gifted and talented in a New Zealand

schooling socio-cultural milieu, thus stories around certain events and historical memories of earlier schooling experiences were also relevant to the research.

The data collected for each case study was predominantly through interviews that encouraged the telling of the participants' 'stories.' I wanted to hear about the lives of these participants as they lived them. I was interested in anecdotes that illustrated the thoughts and feelings these young people had about school experiences, about being gifted and talented, and in particular about achieving or not achieving. In addition, the stories that their parents and teachers could share were also deemed to be important when investigating these lived experiences. Van Manen (1990) believes that anecdotal narrative in phenomenological research has the power to grab our attention, to encourage us to deeply reflect on the meaning behind the anecdote, to link us personally to the story, to move us emotionally and to help us make interpretative sense. The anecdote or story "is one of the implements for laying bare the covered-over meanings" (p. 119). Patton (2002) concurs when he writes about the use of stories as ways to "offer especially translucent windows into cultural and social meanings" (p. 115).

Many of the quotations presented from the participant interviews conducted for this study are anecdotal narratives. These are stories that the participants chose to share with me as illustrations of their lived experiences.

Finding the participants

A qualitative, phenomenological researcher looks to select cases that can provide information-rich data that will help to illuminate and provide insight into the phenomenon of interest. This kind of sampling is commonly termed purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). The focus of the study, and the use of case study as the main strategy of inquiry, invited a purposeful sampling approach in the selection of participants.

Several types of purposeful sampling have been defined (Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). For this study, a range of sampling strategies, as outlined by Creswell (2007), Patton (2002), Merriam (1998) and Miles and Huberman (1994) influenced the final selection of participants. There was "intensity" sampling

in that I looked for cases that could provide variation and depth around understandings on achievement, underachievement and lived school experiences for gifted learners. I was interested in “homogeneous” sampling as I wanted the participants to have been identified as gifted and talented students and to belong to a specific age group, but I also needed “maximum variation” sampling in order to provide detailed descriptions of uniqueness or disconfirming variants as well as patterns, across cases, that might emerge from those differences (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). In selecting two contrasting groups of students, as noted in Point 4 of the sampling frame below, I was using a “stratified purposeful” sampling strategy. Finally there was an element of “convenience” sampling, where selection is based on factors such as time, location, or ease of access to subjects (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998). I approached only one school in one area at the beginning of the selection process because access to that school was assured.

In addition, I made “within-case” sampling decisions – which particular experiences, activities, stories, perspectives did I want to explore for each participant? Which key people for each case did I want to talk to? I employed “collective case” sampling for the study because I was aware that this “adds confidence to the findings. By looking at a range of similar and contrasting cases, we can understand a single-case finding, grounding it by specifying *how* and *where* and, if possible, *why* it carries on as it does” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 29). Collective case sampling allows for replication across a number of cases that may lead to similar or contrasting findings which can help illuminate the phenomena of interest (Punch, 2009).

The sampling frame

Finding key participants – gifted and talented students – who would be willing to share their lived experiences with me by taking part in the research, and who would fit within the bounded context of the case study as I had planned it, was an important sampling issue. Miles and Huberman (1994) emphasise that collective case study sampling has to be given careful thought and be guided by the both the conceptual framework for the study and the research questions. Constructing a “sampling frame” can provide appropriate focus for selection of participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Punch, 2009). I developed the following sampling frame which bounded the units (cases) that I would investigate:

1. Participants are in Year 8 at a local school
2. Participants are identified as gifted and talented
3. Parent and student participants show a willingness to take part
4. Participants have historical reports as achievers or underachievers.
5. Participants are scheduled to attend a range of high schools

Coupled with these broad aims, I needed to set further boundaries around the cases given the limits of time and funding, but which would still enable me to answer my research questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These are what Patton (2002, p.223) refers to as the “trade-offs” that any researcher must make as decisions about design are made. How many participants should be studied? In which settings? How often? For how long? What kinds of data collection procedures could realistically be utilised, given that I was working as a sole researcher with limited funding?

The extent to which a research ... study is broad or narrow depends on purpose, the resources available, the time available, and the interests of those involved. In brief, these are not choices between good and bad but choices among alternatives, all of which have merit. (Patton, 2002, p. 228)

In line with Patton’s comments, the following sections describe how I went about making the selection of participants for this research project, including some of the difficulties that arose and the justifications for the final choices made.

1. Participants are in Year 8 at a local school.

My initial thinking about the research had been around the idea of tracking a group of gifted and talented learners through some of their school years in order to see if there were significant differences in experiences and in understandings about achievement between certain school years. I was keen to use a longitudinal data collection process because I believed that this would help to establish a relationship with the participants in keeping with the phenomenological framework of my study. For me, exploring lived experiences meant more than a one-off interview. As I explained in Chapter One, I decided to focus on adolescents. I was interested in the developing adolescent

identities of bright young students, specifically with respect to how the negotiation of their social lives impacted on their achievement or underachievement in schooling matters. Was this more or less of an issue for gifted and talented learners?

Schooling in New Zealand begins for all children at age five. Their first year of school is Year 1 and the final year that they can attend is Year 13, when the majority of students would be 17 or 18 years old. Year 8 is the second year of intermediate School, (Years 1–6 are primary school years). Although some students would stay at the same school for Years 1–8, many move from a primary to an intermediate school where they spend two years, Years 7–8, before moving on to a high school in Year 9. Most students in Year 8 would be 12 or 13 years of age.

Because my main strategy of inquiry was collective case studies I needed to have easy access to my participants. I strongly felt that I would prefer face-to-face interviews rather than use some other means. This meant that it was important for the participants to be attending a local school so that I could meet with them in person. The difficulties of being a single researcher, who would be conducting all the interviews, led me to a ‘trade-off.’ I elected to limit the selection process to one local, urban intermediate school with which I had developed a previous relationship, both as a professional and as a parent of children who had attended this school. I was confident of gaining access to this school through direct communication with the Principal. I have given this school the pseudonym of ‘Skye Intermediate.’

2. Participants are identified as gifted and talented or highly able

There is much debate about the conceptualisation of giftedness and talent, as outlined in Chapter Two. In selecting the participants for this study, I made the decision to abide by the terms used in the MOE policy documents and to use the identification processes operated by Skye Intermediate, the school from where I was able to access a group of adolescent students who might meet the criteria developed for my sampling frame (see Appendix 1).

Students, who had been selected for the high ability classes through the processes in place at the school, were identified as potential participants in the research. It transpired that some of these students had been more formally identified as gifted and talented, either by the school or by other forms of identification, than other students.

All were said to be highly able because they were in the high ability classes. I have chosen to use the term ‘gifted and talented’ for all the case study students, based upon the New Zealand Ministry of Education definition which takes a strongly inclusive approach. However, it is understood that some of these students would not have been officially assigned this label during their schooling years.

3. Parent and student participants show a willingness to take part

A letter was sent to the Principal of Skye Intermediate, requesting permission to contact the parents of all students in two of the Year 8 high ability classes, for the purposes of the research project. Consent was granted and information letters and consent forms were then sent to all the parents of the students in the two classes (via the classroom teachers who handed these to the students to take home), inviting them to take part in an initial interview with me about the school experiences of their child (Appendices 2 and 3). From the 66 letters sent out (Class 1, n=34; Class 2, n=32), I received replies, including consent, from 20 parents (Class 1= 12 replies; Class 2=8 replies). This response was slightly dissatisfying, but also expected as it was understood that voluntary participation in a research study could mean that the uptake might not be large from a group of busy, often working, parents such as these. Although the classroom teachers were very helpful in reminding the students to give the letters to their parents it can be assumed that some letters did not make it home. I elected to leave the final checking to the classroom teachers and not to push too hard in case it might affect my relationship with either teacher, both of whom I needed to interview at a later date. The support I received from both the Principal and the classroom teachers was excellent and this made the process of beginning the research study a smooth one for me.

Skye Intermediate is a state intermediate school in a mid to high socio-economic area, with quite a large multi-cultural intake, particularly from Asian families but also from Maori, Pasifika and several other ethnic backgrounds. I was thus disappointed that all of the parents who replied to my request represented families from New Zealand European backgrounds. I had been hoping for some diversity in terms of ethnicity, in order to perhaps explore perceptions about experiences for gifted and talented students from a variety of cultural backgrounds. However, in accordance with my sampling decisions and ethical permission, I was only able to include in my

participant group parents and students who had agreed to be part of the study on a voluntary basis.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 parents (two were eventually unable to be contacted following several attempts) during December 2007 and February 2008. The purpose of these interviews was to help me make decisions about the final participant selection. I was looking to select a sample of 12 students, a number chosen as being adequate for a collective case study of this type (Stake, 2006). I prepared a schedule of focus questions for the interview, which were designed to help me make a subjective judgement about the suitability of each student as a participant for the study (Appendix 4). I collected demographic information from the parents at this first interview. At the conclusion of the interview I made it clear to parents that they might be asked to participate further in the study and that both they and their child would need to agree to this, but that there was no obligation to continue in the study if they did not wish to do so.

4. Participants have historical reports as achievers or underachievers

Although this research project was not specifically designed as a comparison study, I was, at the initial stage of selection, focusing more on understandings about the phenomena of both achievement and underachievement. To this end I decided to look for a group of students whose parents reported predominantly high levels of ‘achievement’ during past schooling, and a group of students whose parents reported incidents of ‘underachievement’ during previous schooling years. My interest was not in the continuum of achievement from the highest level to the lowest. I was aware from the literature that for the specific group of students I was hoping to recruit, very low achievement was probably not occurring but performing below what was expected of them for their perceived ability could be (Gross, 2004; Rimm, 2008). I was looking for reports from the parents of incidents when their child had consistently underperformed over a period at school, of when there was evidence of an obvious discrepancy between their ability and their outputs – the so called potential versus performance gap. By bounding the cases in this way, I felt I may be able to explore differing perspectives around the lived experiences of a group of gifted and talented students that would help with a rich understanding of the phenomena of interest.

5. Participants are scheduled to attend a range of local high schools

As part of the sampling frame, I made the decision to prioritise the high schools that students were scheduled to attend in 2008 when they left Skye. I wanted to explore the different experiences that gifted and talented students might have at a variety of local high schools. I felt this would provide some diversity for the study and bring in a contextual element to the various understandings that the participants may have. What difference might the particular context and culture of a school make to the learner's experiences?

The sampling frame used to select the final group of key participants for this study is summarised in Table 1, which is presented below. Additional information that influenced the selection of participants was, firstly, around reported experiences of being bullied that were related to the student being 'smart' (in line with my exploration of identity issues for these students); and secondly, whether or not parents, unprompted, espoused particular views on what 'gifted and talented' meant. I was interested in how these able adolescents might 'fit' in schooling environments and any links that this may have to the phenomena of interest. The final group was made up of 11 students, seven boys and four girls, whom I felt fulfilled the criteria that I had deemed important for this study.

Table 1: The sampling frame and potential participants

Sampling variable as reported by parents	Students S1–18 (students selected for study in bold)
Reports of achievement constant in primary school	S.1 ; S.2; S.5 ; S.7; S.8 ; S.10; S.18
Reports of underachievement in primary school	S.3 ; S.4; S.9; S.11 ; S.12 ; S.13 ; S.15 ; S.16
Reports of bullying episodes	S.5 ; S.11 ; S.15 ; S.17
Parent mentions ‘gifted and talented’ unprompted	S.1 ; S.2; S.4; S.5 ; S.8 ; S.14 ; S.17; S.18
High school attending in 2008	Mull School – S.2; S.3 ; S.4; S.10; S.11 ; S.12 ; S.15 ; S.17 Jura School – S.6; S.7; S.13 ; S.14 ; S.16 Islay School – S.18 Tiree School – S.1 ; S.8 Staffa School – S.5 Coll School – S.9

Introducing the participants

The students

The student participants are introduced briefly below. They are identified by a pseudonym that they each chose for themselves, except for one who did not come up

with a name and whom I have called Lewis. More detailed and personal profiles of these young people are presented in Chapter Five.

April is a high achieving girl with a talent in music. Her mother reported that she has always worked to perform to the best of her ability in all areas. Her teacher feels that April pushes herself to achieve at all times.

Astrid is talented in music and dance and usually achieves highly, academically. She has had periods in her schooling when she has not achieved to her ability, according to her mother.

Autumn Ashes has a passion for music and dance. She has had periods in her primary school years when she was subjected to bullying and she was underachieving at that time, her mother reports. She was identified by her primary school as gifted and talented.

Bruce Wayne does not always achieve as well as he can and can lack motivation to achieve, according to his mother. His teacher says he took some time to achieve to his ability at Skye Intermediate but he did succeed in the latter months of his time there. He is a talented tennis player.

Hubert Cumberland is a top sportswoman, particularly in hockey. She currently achieves highly, academically. However, she has not always done so, as her mother says she found it difficult to concentrate during her early school years due to her high energy levels.

Kurt usually does well in school subjects but he can underachieve when he is not motivated to learn in some subject areas, as reported by both his mother and his teacher. He has a particular talent and passion for maths and enjoys music and sports.

Lewis was identified as gifted and talented when he was young, but his mother prefers not to use the term. Lewis is very able academically and enjoys creative activities such as drama. He has always achieved highly, according to his mother.

Marty is identified as being very academically able by his teacher and he achieves highly at school. His mother says he would never think about not doing his work to the best of his ability.

Mr Bubbles, and his parents, were surprised when he was identified as highly able by the school, according to his mother. His mother says he tries to achieve highly but his teacher reports he sometimes gets distracted by peers. He is scared of being seen as a 'nerd.' He is a talented football player.

Oliver Stone has always worked hard at school and has had good results, including a recent scholarship. He is a top cricketer and is motivated to work at his cricket and his academic subjects at school.

Rambo has had periods of underachievement throughout his school years according to both his mother and his teacher at Skye. He means to do his best but doesn't always achieve this in practice. He is particularly interested and able in science-related areas.

The parents

The parent participants interviewed were all mothers, although on occasion a father or partner would be present at an interview and would add a comment. Although all the parents identified their children as either 'New Zealander,' 'European' or 'Kiwi' in terms of ethnicity in the Demographic Questionnaire, one mother was Canadian. Of the 11 mothers interviewed, eight worked outside the home either full time or part-time and three did not work outside the home. Ten of the parents were in married relationships and one lived with a de facto partner at the time of the interviews. Six of the mothers had University degrees, two had diplomas and three had high school qualifications as their highest educational qualification.

The teachers

Teacher participants were the two teachers from the high ability classes at Skye Intermediate, and the nine teachers from the five different high schools that the 11 students attended. The Skye Intermediate teachers were both male and in their early thirties. One teacher was an experienced teacher of high ability students and shared the role of Gifted and Talented Co-ordinator at the school. He was also the teacher in charge of sport, having been a top cricketer in his time. The other teacher was a

talented musician and was in charge of music. Both teachers were held in very high regard by all the 18 parents I interviewed at the initial stage.

High school teachers interviewed mainly held the position of the Year 9 Form Teacher at the students' high schools, but in some cases the student nominated another teacher for me to interview instead. All students were given this opportunity. One teacher was the form teacher for two of the students and was interviewed about both these students at the same interview. A brief background of Skye Intermediate and the five high schools, plus the positions of the teachers who were interviewed, is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Participating schools and teachers

Schools	Information on Participating Schools	Teacher
<i>Skye Intermediate</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Years 7–8 • Decile 8 • Urban • Co-educational • State – 751 total 	Teacher A – classroom teacher for high ability class; shares GATE role Teacher B – classroom teacher for high ability class; school music specialist
<i>Mull School</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Years 9–13 • Decile 8 • Large urban • Co-educational • State – 2,528 total 	Teacher C – Form teacher Teacher D – Social Studies teacher Teacher E – German teacher
<i>Jura School</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Years 9–13 • Decile 9 • Urban plus boarding • Boys only • State – 1,335 total 	Teacher F – Form teacher Teacher G – Form teacher
<i>Tiree School</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Years 9–13 • Decile 9 • Urban • Girls only • State – 1,084 total 	Teacher H – Form teacher
<i>Islay School</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Years 9–13 • Decile 10 • Urban plus boarding • Boys only • Private – 661 total 	Teacher I – Housemaster Teacher J – Form teacher
<i>Staffa School</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Years 1–13 • Decile 10 • Urban plus boarding • Girls only • Private – 717 total 	Teacher K – English teacher

(Information on decile rating and school totals retrieved from

http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/tertiary_education/27436.)

Tools of inquiry: Data collection

Why do we need to collect the “data” of other people’s experiences?
We gather other people’s experiences because they allow us to become
more experienced ourselves. (van Manen, 1990, p. 62)

The tools of inquiry that I used to collect data for this study were chosen in line with the phenomenological approach to human science inquiry as appropriate within a case study design and as facilitating an exploration of real lived experience. In terms of the case study approach, I was looking to build an information-rich case study for each key participant (Creswell, 2007). I decided this was best achieved by using a variety of forms of data collection. Yin (2003) advocates data triangulation, that is, collecting data from multiple sources that are aimed at “corroborating the same fact or phenomenon” (p. 99). Although by using multiple data sources an argument could be made for stronger credibility to the research, my main reason for doing so was to allow me to gather as much information as I could about each key participant’s experiences so that a meaningful understanding of those lived experiences could be reached.

The three sources of data collection procedures that I chose were semi-structured interviewing, protocol writing and school documents.

Semi-structured interviews: The phenomenological way

The principal means of collecting data for the study was through individual, semi-structured interviewing: a form of interviewing whereby the same general questions or topics are asked of each of the participants involved (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The interview is a suitable way of obtaining rich data in phenomenological, qualitative research because, as Danaher and Briod (2005) point out, “language is the primary carrier of experience and meaning” (p. 221).

There are many ways of interviewing for qualitative research purposes, but I was aware that I needed to approach the interview from a phenomenological perspective. Although the focus of an interview is to explore the subjective experiences of a

participant around the phenomenon of interest, in phenomenological research more is required. A researcher needs to keep in mind that “the deeper goal, which is always the thrust of phenomenological research, remains oriented to asking the question of what is the nature of this phenomenon ... as an essentially human experience” (van Manen, 1990, p. 62).

A phenomenological interview is informal and interactive. While questions are prepared in advance, these are often altered during the interview if the interviewee finds another way to share an experience fully. Mutch (2005) defines a semi-structured interview as “an interview where a set of guiding questions is used but where the interview is open to changes along the way” (p. 225). Questions are prepared as open-ended and probes can be employed to help elicit fuller descriptions, but these are sometimes added spontaneously during an interview for clarification of responses that may not have been predicted in preparing for the interview (Moustakas, 1994).

The driving force behind any interview should be the research question, about a particular phenomenon, that prompted the need to collect data in the first place. A phenomenological interview has very specific purposes. These are to collect accounts of the experiences of a phenomenon in order to better understand the nature of that phenomenon, and to develop a conversational relationship with the interviewee in order to make the process of this exploration a collaborative one of meaning-making between researcher and participant (van Manen, 1990). The exchange is a time for the participant to reflect on lived experiences and, in conversation with the researcher, attempt to interpret the deeper meanings behind such experiences. Thus, the process of establishing rapport with the interviewee is extremely important. This process is helped if a series of interviews can be arranged, rather than a one off.

I also elected to conduct semi-structured focus group interviews with the students for the third interview. Hennessy and Heary (2005) see focus group interviews as being suitable for adolescents as this age group is likely to be able to keep the conversation going without too much interference from the moderator, something a younger group of children could find more difficult. This kind of interview can provide valuable data. Rather than having to provide all the answers, as in an individual interview situation, a participant can be both acknowledged as the expert and encouraged to formulate

some opinions in greater depth through the interaction with others in the group. Interviewees can snowball off each other and the group situation may provide some security for them to be more candid in their responses, particularly if the group is seen as a safe peer environment (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012; Hennessy & Heary, 2005; Punch, 2009). The researcher acts as a group convenor to what Clough and Nutbrown (2012, p. 92) prefer to call a “focused conversation” and guides the group interaction as experiences and interests are shared. Controlling the dynamics of the group and ensuring an equal sharing of ideas needs to be balanced with the need for openness and the opportunity for challenging and extending ideas.

Electing to be true to the phenomenological interview process did bring about some challenges. An interesting aspect that has arisen in recent times around the interview process is the belief that Western culture has become an ‘interview society’ (Chase, 2005; Fontana & Frey, 2005). Researchers tend to believe that listening to participants’ voices provides a true account of their ‘authentic’ selves “as if their selves and voices were not already mediated by the social contexts in which they speak” (Chase, 2005, p. 670). How was I to be sure that I was getting from my participants what they really thought? Was it possible that some respondents were ‘parroting’ what they thought I wanted to hear, or, in particular with the adolescents, what they had garnered from parents and other adults? Even adolescents have learned how to ‘do’ interviews these days with the plethora of interview experiences shown in popular Western media culture. This was a challenge for me in terms of relying heavily on the data from interviews.

A major tenet for phenomenology is that a researcher needs to bracket his or her pre-assumptions about the phenomenon being studied before going into the field as a researcher (Ehrich, 2003; Giles, 2008; Moustakas, 1994) (see also Chapter One). Husserl coined the term ‘epoche’ to refer to a suspension of previously held beliefs so that a phenomenon can be looked at with fresh vision, in new and sometimes unconventional ways (Ehrich, 2003). However, in van Manen’s (1990) six steps of phenomenological research action he begins with the advice that one should select a phenomenon that is of personal value and interest because “a person who turns towards phenomenological reflection does so out of personal engagement” (p. 154). The challenge is for the researcher to attempt as much as possible to put aside these

personal understandings or biases that may colour the interview or direct participants' responses (Giles, 2008; Moustakas, 1994).

There is a further challenge for the researcher when interviewing. It is essential to establish rapport with the participant in an interview situation if the goal is to encourage a smooth flow of conversation resulting in, hopefully, critical reflection on the experiences being explored. However, an interviewee may already hold a perception of the researcher as the 'expert.' There are two aspects to this issue of positionality. Firstly, how does the researcher contribute to the dialogue in order to help 'give voice' to the participants? And secondly, at the same time, how can the researcher avoid setting up positions of dominance and bias? How much real control do I as the researcher have over any positioning? Is some of that control in the hands of the participants?

My aim for the interviews that I conducted for this research was to be both conversational and co-constructive, as befits a phenomenological approach. An important focus was to encourage an atmosphere of trust. I felt that the strength of the researcher-participant relationship would have a strong bearing on the quality of the data that I could collect. How was I to marry this with the need to bracket any pre-assumptions about the phenomena of achievement and underachievement for gifted and talented students, garnered over years of being involved in gifted and talented education? Clough and Nutbrown (2012) ask if it is "intellectually honest" (p. 70) to keep our own voices out of the research process and the final interpretation. I was of the view that I did not intend to sit apart from the interviewee and pretend to be a novice in the area I was researching as I did not see this kind of position as intellectually honest and it did not fulfil my wish to build trust with the participants over the 18 months of interviewing. I declared my position as someone who had been involved in the field of gifted education for several years (as outlined in Chapter One), at the beginning of the interviews. If it came up in conversation during an interview with any of the participants, I also declared my position as a parent of highly able children. However, I did attempt to engage in the epoche process about the phenomena of interest before I went into the field and while I was conducting the interviews I did not continue with any academic reading around the topics.

I also made the decision to include my 'voice' in the interviews in response to participants. I saw the interview as a "co-constructive process of meaning-making" (Greene & Hogan, 2005, p. 153) in which both were active participants in the negotiation of meaning. Meaning could not be explored solely by the participant answering my pre-selected questions. I felt that I needed to contribute to the conversation so that the interviewees could feel more secure in developing their own ideas about the meaning for them around selected concepts. I adhered to the idea of conversational partners (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) which allowed for the individuality of each participant to come through in the interactions.

The process of setting up my position was thus in line with the constructivist-interpretivist knowledge claim espoused for this thesis, for as Merriam succinctly states:

The researcher thus brings a construction of reality to the research situation, which interacts with other people's constructions or interpretations of the phenomenon being studied. The final product of this type of study is yet another interpretation by the researcher of others' views filtered through his or her own. (Merriam, 1998, p. 22)

A further issue that needed consideration was that of managing the shifts of power that could occur during an interview. Through my early attempts at establishing trust and at bracketing my pre-assumptions, I hoped that the power balance would not be weighted towards me but I also knew that I was not the only one influencing the interview. A participant could choose to place me in a certain position, for example as the 'expert,' even if I had done my best to put strategies in place to avoid this. I liked the Kaupapa Maori approach to the researcher-participant relationship in which "the positioning is part of participation" (Bishop, 2005, p. 120). The researcher does not choose to position himself or herself but this evolves as the relationship progresses with both researcher and participant taking turns at being in control during a free and open exchange. This became an aim for me as I conducted the interviews.

The ways in which I responded to some of these challenges, particularly in terms of positionality and establishing trust within the researcher-participant relationship, are explored later in this chapter when I discuss the ethical considerations for the study.

The interview process for this study

A total of 76 individual interviews and three focus group interviews were conducted over the course of the study.

Parent interviews

The first set of interviews with parents, conducted for selection purposes, lasted between 45 minutes and an hour in duration. A digital voice recorder was used to tape each interview, with permission for this being sought from the participant at the beginning of the interview. A set of focus questions (see Appendix 4) was prepared for the semi-structured interviews but participants were reminded that they were welcome to contribute further points that might help with clarification at any time in the interview.

The second round of interviews with the parents of the 11 selected student participants was carried out in October and November of 2008, when the student participants had almost completed their first year of high school. Interviews were conducted mostly in participants' homes with one being held at my place of work and three at the parent's place of work. A different interview schedule was prepared, with a focus on how parents saw their child's high school experiences to date. The first questions about their understandings of the concepts of achievement and underachievement were introduced.

A final interview with each of the parent participants was conducted during June and July of 2009. The students were mid-way through their Year 10 year at this stage. Questions for this last interview were influenced by the data from earlier interviews. These explored understandings about what being gifted and talented means, about the parents' views on the various schools' practices in relation to gifted and talented education and a follow up to questions on understandings about the phenomena of interest. A question about the impact the study may have had on them was included. As this was the last time I would see them as participants, I thought it would be interesting to encourage some kind of reflection from them about the study that could contribute to analysis.

Interviews were again held at parents' homes, except for two which were at the parent's place of work and one was held at my office. I did not interview one of the parents for this round as she had been involved in a marriage break up and after a couple of attempts to contact her at her new address, with no success, I felt it would be intrusive to continue to chase her when she was going through a difficult personal time. One of the other parents had also experienced a relationship break up at the end of 2008 but she indicated strongly that she and her child were both willing to continue with the study.

All interviews were recorded and then transcribed. At the end of each interview completed transcripts were offered to the parents for verification checks but at no stage did any of the parent participants request to see the transcripts.

Student interviews

The process for the interviews with the students followed that of the parent interviews. Students were asked to give their permission for the interview to be recorded, interviews followed a semi-structured format using a prepared interview schedule, but allowing for flexibility along the way, and students were asked if they wanted to view the interview transcript to check for authenticity.

I wanted to try and develop a positive long-term relationship with these students so I decided to hold an initial get-together with all the students so that they could meet me, the researcher. I met the students in two groups (because of their availability issues) on two separate Friday afternoons in May 2008, at a lounge area in my work place. I talked to them about the study and answered any questions they had so that they could be sure about their commitment to the project. The students knew each other from Skye Intermediate but confidentiality issues were explained to them so that they were assured that their confidentiality outside of this study was protected. No recorded notes were taken from this meeting.

The first individual student interviews were then held from May to July in 2008 when the students were in Year 9. I visited the students' homes for nine of the interviews and the other two were held in my office as both these students lived out of town and elected to come to me after school for the interview. Questions in this first interview were structured to elicit information about their own views on their personalities, on

their schooling history, and a first exploration of their understandings about the phenomena of interest. Interviews lasted for between 35 and 50 minutes. In December of 2008 I offered the students a 'pizza tea' get-together to thank them for their contributions to the study in 2008 and for agreeing to continue. Only seven of the group were able to attend.

A second round of interviews was held with the student participants during April and May of 2009. The students were just completing the end of Term 1 in Year 10. I interviewed eight students in their homes and two at my work place. I was unable to arrange an interview with Mr Bubbles despite several attempts and because it was his parents who were going through a marriage break up at this time, I decided it would not be appropriate to continue to approach him. I did not see Mr Bubbles again in the course of the study. Interview questions for this round aimed to explore the students' thoughts on the first year of high school, on their experiences of high school so far, on what might motivate them to do well or not, and I revisited their understandings about being 'smart' and about what achievement and underachievement meant to them (Appendix 4). Interviews lasted between 50 minutes and one hour.

The third round of student interviews took the form of three semi-structured focus group interviews. These took place in July 2009. I had originally planned to conduct two focus group interviews but because of the difficulties of getting the students together at the same time, I needed to hold three. One was conducted with four members, the second with three members and the third with two. Lewis was unable to attend a focus group interview. All were held in a room at my work place, with food and drink provided by me, on a Friday afternoon after school. The schedule of questions prepared for focus group interviews can also be seen in Appendix 4. During the interview I disclosed the focus of the study as being about gifted and talented students. Focus group interviews lasted between 45 minutes and one hour.

Although offered the chance to view the transcripts of individual and group interviews, none of the students expressed a desire to look at any of the transcripts.

Teacher interviews

Interviewing the teachers was carried out using the same process that was described for the parents and the students. The first teacher interviews were with the two Skye

Intermediate teachers in March of 2008. Interviews were held in the teachers' classrooms after school. One interview lasted for 50 minutes and the other for 40 minutes. Teachers were asked open-ended questions about how they saw the personalities, the special abilities and the achievement history of each of the student participants who had been in their class for the previous two years. During my first reading of the transcripts from these interviews I realised I had been remiss in not specifically asking the two teachers about their understandings of the two phenomena of interest, achievement and underachievement. I felt that since I would not be seeing these teachers again, I should ask them if they would agree to a second brief interview about two important themes that had come from the data so far. Both teachers agreed that I could speak to them again. Two short interviews were held in May 2008 in the teachers' classrooms after school, exploring their perceptions on what achievement and underachievement for gifted and talented learners meant to them.

The second round of teacher interviews was conducted with a Year 9 teacher for each of the student participants, except one, for whom permission was not granted by the school. These took place in December of 2008 and February of 2009. Interviews were held with seven teachers at their own school while two of the teachers preferred to come to my office for the interview. Interview time was between 35 and 55 minutes. Questions for these interviews were focused around the teachers' views on the specific student's personality; on what they saw as a student's special abilities; on a student's school performance; on communication methods between home and school; and on understandings about the phenomena of interest. Teachers were also asked their personal views on gifted and talented education (Appendix 4).

One of the teachers wanted to read the transcript of the interview and minor changes to the transcript were made at her request. None of the other teachers asked to view the interview transcript.

Protocol writing

The use of journal writing, letter writing, or personal reflection sheets as forms of data collection are used when researchers seek to find a method where they are not an obtrusive presence in an investigation, as may be the case with interviews or observations (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998). As van Manen (1990) puts it "if we

wish to investigate the nature of a certain experience or phenomenon, the most straightforward way to go about our research is to ask selected individuals to write their experiences down” (p. 63).

I chose a form of protocol writing, a term used by van Manen, to encourage a reflective attitude from the student participants about their experiences of school. Protocol writing, “the generating of original texts” (van Manen, 1990, p. 63), is a way of exploring direct accounts of personal experiences that can allow the writer to express their feelings and is not necessarily concerned with factual accuracy. Thoughts may come to the writer at different times in the day or week, rather than engaging in a struggle to express oneself or bring ideas to mind when in the middle of an interview situation. For example, Dillon (2011a) asked her gifted and talented adolescent participants to communicate via digital writing, emails, which allowed self-expression in a non-intrusive format and was at their convenience.

I was aware that there could be difficulties in asking adolescents to do more writing, which many would see as a ‘task’ rather than a pleasure, but I did want to allow time for their own reflection on their experiences in the context of the phenomena being studied. I hoped that the protocol writing would provide a further reconstruction of some parts of their schooling life.

Collecting reflection sheets from student participants

The student participants were informed about the protocol writing part of the data collection at the initial group meeting in May 2008, held before individual interviews began. I showed the students the template of the ‘Reflection Sheet’ that I wanted them to fill in and send to me every month (Appendix 5). The first reflection sheets were received in May and June of 2008. The purpose behind the reflection sheets was to encourage the students to report regularly on their lived experiences of schooling, especially in terms of their personal views on whether or not they were achieving well or not achieving well. I encouraged them to be as honest as they could in their reports and not to see me as a ‘teacher’ or an ‘adult expert’ but as someone who was genuinely interested in their opinions and who would appreciate their directness. I assured them that their reflections would be kept confidential and thus they could safely talk about particular teachers, peers and their parents.

The students were not regular contributors of reflection sheets. Far from being received monthly, it was more likely that I received these reflections every two months at best, despite sending several texts and emails to remind the students. In an effort to increase participation, I tried taking copies of the reflection sheets to the end of year social gathering I arranged for the group in 2008, and again in 2009 to the individual student interviews. This led to a small increase in responses. Numbers of completed reflection sheets for the group ranged from six for two of the girls to none from one boy. Altogether I collected 30 reflection sheets.

Documents

Yin (2003) believes that the use of documents as a source in case study research is primarily to substantiate the findings from other sources. Public and/or personal documents can affirm or reveal contradictions in information that was gathered through interviews or observations. If a document uncovers contradictory information, this can then be followed up by inquiring further. Data collected from documents can add to the richness of the findings but according to Punch (2009), documentary evidence is often neglected in favour of interviews or observations. A benefit of using documentary data in education research is that it is often readily available, in the form of policy documents, school reports and records. Such material can be highly subjective (for example, school reports) and it is usually not written with the purposes of the research in mind, but “if documents are used as part of the process of inductively building categories and theoretical constructs as in qualitative case studies, then their ‘fit’ with pre-established concepts or models is less of a concern” (Merriam, 1998, p. 125).

I was interested in the historical descriptions of the schooling experiences of the key participants and past school reports seemed to be a source that I could use for this purpose. I was looking for descriptions of achieving or underachieving and anecdotal narratives from past teachers about the students. Schultz (2002a) found that information collected from historical reports added depth that might add to the lived experience material being gathered around his case studies of two underachieving gifted learners. I also believed that viewing the school policies on gifted and talented from each of the schools would aid in establishing the various contexts of the lived school experiences for these students. If the rhetoric in the policies was actually put

into action, what impact did the different school practices in the areas of gifted and talented education have on the experiences for these adolescents, particularly in terms of the phenomena being studied?

Accessing documents: School reports and policies

For my study I obtained permission from both the students and their parents to view past school reports that might help to give a fuller picture of schooling experiences for these learners and the impact that those experiences might have had on understandings about achievement and underachievement. Parents were very open in making these reports available to me and I was able to look at reports, plus other relevant documentation offered to me (scholarship applications, psychometric testing results) for all of the students in the group, except for one girl. I was given access to school reports from both intermediate and primary schools, plus Year 9 mid and end of year reports.

I included permission to examine school documents that may be relevant to my study in the consent forms I asked Principals to sign and this was granted for all the schools. I requested the school policy on gifted and talented education from each school. I wanted to set the understandings that the teachers may have about gifted and talented students and about the phenomena of interest, within the context of the school philosophy under which they were working. I was also interested in the parents' and students' perceptions about a school's approach to catering for these students and how these perceptions may match with an actual policy or practice. A copy of Skye Intermediate's policy was provided for me and a personal email from the teacher in charge of gifted and talented education clarified in further detail the school philosophy and practice in this area (see Appendix 1).

Teachers at two of the high schools provided me with copies of written policy documents. One teacher attempted to find a policy document for me but was unsuccessful, "I've asked about a policy but it appears we don't have one yet" (Teacher at Staffa School, personal communication, June 4th, 2010). The two other high schools did not provide me with a policy when I asked for one. The teacher interviewed from one of these two schools was not aware of any policy, or of particular programmes that catered for gifted and talented students, while the teacher

from the other school knew of a policy but referred me to another teacher to access this, which I tried to do unsuccessfully.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was gained from the University of Canterbury, College of Education Ethical Clearance Committee on 30 October, 2007 (Appendix 6). Ethical considerations around this study included ensuring that informed consent was adhered to for all participants, that participation was voluntary and there was an understanding of the right to withdraw from the research study at any time, that access to schools was negotiated appropriately, that confidentiality was considered, that any deception issues were clarified (detailed below), that the research was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi and that participants were aware of how the research data were to be stored and how findings were to be disseminated.

For the purposes of this study and in line with ethical approval, it was important to gain informed consent from both the selected students and their parents. I needed to be sure that both were willing to take part over an 18 month period and also that both were aware that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The students were 12–13 years of age so were able to decide for themselves if they were interested in being a participant, particularly for a long period of time. However, I did not want to have either, a parent who agreed to take part, and a student who did not, or vice versa. Thus the consent forms given to the two groups of participants reflected this need (see Appendix 3, B). In addition, if one or other of a parent or a student wished to withdraw, then both would no longer be part of the study. Full consent was gained from all 11 key participants and their parents.

Consent was gained to interview both the intermediate teachers and the high school teachers by approaching, firstly, the Principal at each school, and secondly, gaining consent from the teachers themselves. All agreed to be interviewed, except one. The consent to interview this teacher was not granted by the school's Principal, who replied to my request by stating that it was their policy not to consent to interviews because their teachers were too busy. Appendices 2 and 3 show examples of the letters and consent forms used during the various phases of the data collection for the study.

An overriding principle for any research project involving people, and even more so when the participants are children, is the 'do no harm' principle (Creswell, 2007; Hill, 2005; Mutch, 2005). At all times I needed to be sensitive to the emotional needs of my participants. I resolved to be aware of the vulnerability of adolescents, particularly in terms of what could be seen as a power imbalance between me, as the adult, and the key participants as children. In the application to the Ethical Clearance Committee, procedures were outlined that would deal with emotional distress that might arise for any participant during my questioning.

In addition to what I knew were compulsory considerations in order to be given ethical clearance from my institution, I approached the ethical side of this study holding the view that ethical considerations are on-going throughout the research, not to be set aside once official approval has been granted (Creswell, 2007). I was asking my participants to give up their time to talk to me, either two or three times over an 18 month period. In many cases, I was asking to come into their homes to interview them. I was asking them to allow me access to private documents such as school reports and to share their responses with a larger audience. I wanted at all times to establish a trustworthy, respectful relationship with these people so that they could have confidence in me to represent their stories as faithfully as I was able. Van Manen (1990) notes that research such as a qualitative phenomenological study, where the researcher enters the world of the participant, can

have lingering effects on the actual 'subjects' involved in the study. For example, intense conversational interviews may lead to self-awareness, possible changes in life style, and shifting priorities of living. But, if done badly, these methods may instead lead to feelings of anger, disgust, defeat, intolerance, insensitivity, etc. (p. 162)

I felt this responsibility strongly and endeavoured to continually assure the participants of confidentiality at each interview, to ask for permission to record the interviews, to provide the participants with updates on the progress of the research whenever possible and to ensure reciprocity by offering to send them completed transcripts for feedback after each interview. I sent thank you cards on two occasions to the parent and student participants acknowledging their contributions to the research. I sent emails to the high school teachers following the interviews and bought thank you gifts for the two intermediate teachers who had helped with data collection

and fitted me in twice for interviews among their busy lives. I used a form of inducement in that I gave chocolate bars to the student participants when they took the time to write up reflection sheets for me. In accordance with Stake (2005) I believed that “qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world. Their manners should be good and their code of ethics strict” (p. 459).

In order to protect the participants’ confidentiality outside of the participant group, I put in place several processes. I attached a pseudonym to the intermediate school from where I recruited the participants. I was careful not to identify in any way the teachers I interviewed. I have not specified the actual geographical area of New Zealand where the research took place. I asked each student participant to nominate a pseudonym for themselves that would be used in all written or oral presentations about the research. Parents were not identified by name but as ‘parent of,’ followed by their child’s pseudonym.

Deception and disclosure issues

The process of contacting the parents at the beginning of the research involved some deception. Although I was interested in the lived experiences of gifted and talented students, professional and personal experience led me to believe that some parents and students were not comfortable with such a term, even though this was the accepted terminology used in education circles in New Zealand and in the research literature. I was interested in students with a range of gifts and talents so I made the decision to nominate ‘highly able’ as the term used in any communications to describe the students I was looking to recruit. I believed that most parents and students would be more accepting of this term and that this might increase the chances of uptake for the project and might ensure that parents and students were more comfortable in their future communications with me. Thus, when I communicated with the potential participants, the study was titled ‘Experiences of Able Students in New Zealand Schools.’

Additionally, given that a focus for this study was around understandings that the selected participants held about the concepts of achievement and underachievement, I was reluctant to specify these terms in my original communications with potential participants. I did not want the terms to be constructed solely through my lens as the

researcher who had many years of experience in the field of gifted education, but was aiming for a co-construction of what the phenomena of achievement and underachievement may mean for the study participants.

It was a potential ethical issue that I presented selected information in the negotiations for participation, but it was not a form of deception that was likely to be sustained in the process of the study. Procedures were specified in the Ethics Application whereby disclosure issues would be clarified if any participant asked a direct question about any of the terms mentioned above. It was anticipated that disclosure would occur during the study. A copy of a suggested 'Debriefing Letter' was prepared, should it be needed, to clarify any deception issues (see Appendix 7).

Responses to ethical concerns from the study

The collection of data for this study took place over a period of time and in that time several ethical issues presented themselves. I needed to make decisions about how to respond to these problems, sometimes on the spot or sometimes in consultation with my supervisors. One example was the change in family circumstances for Mr Bubbles during the course of the data collection. This meant I had to consider whether to continue to approach Mr Bubbles or whether to leave things be, after he failed to respond to my communications. In consideration of the ethical principle of 'do no harm,' I did not feel comfortable intruding on what was becoming a stressful situation for him and his mother and so I decided to leave him out of the study following the second interview with his mother.

The refusal from one of the high schools to allow me to interview a teacher was also accepted after I had made two attempts to approach the Principal for permission. The response remained the same: "It is the school's policy to refuse such requests. We have a considerable number of such requests and it is demanding of teacher time in a very busy school year" (email communication from Assistant Principal, Mull School, March 23rd, 2009). I was keen to talk to the teacher concerned as I had heard from the parent that there had been some very interesting issues with this student and the school, but I was not able to proceed without permission from the school. The parent of this student had asked me not to talk to a teacher at the school initially, a request I respected, but then changed her mind as things seemed to improve, and gave

permission. However, the interview did not eventuate because of the school's stance. Two ethical issues were apparent here. It was important for me to respect the school's position and I was also aware of the need to ensure there was no repercussion for the student or parent as a result of my pressuring the school for access to the teacher. After two attempts it was time to step back.

Van Manen (1990) observes that involvement in the research could lead to an increased awareness or a possible change in thinking for the people with whom the research is concerned. This could be seen as a positive outcome from participation in the study but it may also lead to ethical concerns for the researcher. Another dilemma arose for me when one parent rang me to say she was going to "speak to the school" about her concerns for her daughter because she now "realised that things were not good" after speaking with me in the interview. I was concerned at being seen as the catalyst for this, because of my confidentiality promises to the teacher from this school. However, I expressed these concerns to the parent who agreed not to mention the study and later reported to me that it was a very successful meeting and improvements were being made with the cooperation of the school.

Two of the parents asked me for my professional opinion at the end of their last individual interviews. They wanted to know whether or not I thought they, the parents, should be following up with the specific schools about some concerns that they had each expressed in the interview. I felt it was important in terms of trust that I responded to their concerns but I stressed that I was doing so as someone with experience in the field and as a 'friend,' and that any advice needed to be seen as separate from the research project which was bound by confidentiality. Furthermore, I needed to be sure that any advice I gave was not interpreted as criticism of either the school or the participants. I understood their position as parents who wanted to do the best they could for their children and I saw the sharing of any professional expertise I might have as a way of 'giving back' to these participants. Rubin and Rubin (2005) note that being part of a project may be of benefit to the participants by helping them overcome specific problems or by bringing issues to the attention of the public and policy makers.

The challenge of collecting regular reflection sheets from the student participants also led to some reflection on my part. How much should I push the students to complete

these when I knew I was imposing on their time? Most of these young people were busy at school, had several outside of school activities and needed family and social time as well. The students were always very apologetic about not handing in reflection sheets and there were many promises to do so but generally these were not forthcoming. I found the reflection sheets that did come to me very valuable but I made the decision to give two reminders – usually a text or an email – and then just accept that these were not going to be ‘monthly’ as I had initially planned.

The researcher-participant relationship

Time, relationships, and space were necessary for establishing the collaborative relationship – a relationship in which both researcher and practitioner had voice. (Jewell, 2007, p. 295)

An ethical issue that I was aware of throughout the process was that of the relationship between researcher and participant, for “power dominates research relationships – intentionally or not” (Gordon & Mutch, 2006, p. 18). I worked to mitigate this throughout the research process. As Jewell alludes to, the decision to conduct the data collection over a longer time period had benefits in terms of the rapport I was able to establish with the parent and student participants for this study. Throughout the data collection period, I endeavoured to build a collaborative and trusting relationship with all participants, while being aware that the relationship was not necessarily an equal one, as my position as the leader of the project and the ‘authority’ in the field meant there was always some power imbalance.

I also wanted to ensure that I used reflective practices related to my data collection procedures that might lead to improvement in the way strategies of inquiry were used. One approach I put in place to help me do this was to keep a research journal which contained “reflective field notes” (Mutch, 2005, p. 224) that I wrote down immediately following each interview. These would include my overall feeling about the tone of the interview, my immediate perceptions about the way the relationship with the participant was developing, any concerns that I had and ideas for any themes that I could explore in future interviews or with other participants. I was then able to look at these notes before the next interview and reacquaint myself with the personal traits of each participant in the hope that our conversational partnership might lead to

deeper interpretative insights. I also made sure that I re-read the transcript of previous interviews from both parents and students before I conducted another interview with parent or student participants.

The benefit of carrying out the data collection over a longer period of time was evident in terms of the growing confidence both parents and students appeared to have in revealing their thoughts to me as each interview progressed. My position seemed to change from that of feeling like an ‘outsider’ – the researcher, the ‘expert,’ the interviewer – to more that of an ‘insider’ (Gordon & Mutch, 2006; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). With the parents, this came about primarily because of the connections that developed as it became clear that we were all positioned as parents of gifted and talented learners. We understood our roles as parents who were trying to support their children through their schooling, struggling to make the best decisions we could to help work towards positive outcomes for these adolescents.

I tried to develop this ‘insider’ position over the course of the interviews. With the parent group, I wanted to develop a constructivist-interpretivist approach around shared understandings and to encourage the conversational rapport that might help parents contribute in greater depth. At times I needed to add my voice more strongly in an interview. For example, Marty’s mother was nervous at the first interview and not confident in her responses.

Marty’s mother: This is too hard. I don’t know.

Louise: There’s no right answer, that’s the whole thing.

Marty’s mother: I don’t know. I’m not sort of – I’m not good at thinking things like this.

Louise: Well, what sort of things would you and J pick up which might make you think, “Oh my goodness, Marty is actually not” – you know?

Marty’s mother: Well, I guess if he wasn’t getting all ‘As’...

Although she was still claiming that she was “not very good at this sort of thing,” in the third interview her answers came more quickly and were more definite and assured as she ‘knew the routine’ by then and seemed relaxed in my presence.

Louise: And what role do you think a teacher’s understanding of the needs of the gifted and talented plays in gifted students doing well or achieving well? You know, how important is that teacher’s understanding?

Marty’s mother: Well I’d only be guessing, but I would imagine it’s very important that they identify the children that are sitting there bored and – or could be doing more.

In addition, I needed to ensure that I was keeping to the ‘bracketing’ that is required in phenomenological interviews. I tried to distance myself from the parents’ perceptions of me as an expert by emphasising to them that it was their voice that I needed to hear.

Hubert Cumberland’s mother: And maybe you don’t wanna hear that, because I know you’re really keen on ...

Louise: Um well I do actually because it’s very interesting and I mean, you know ... this is an interview about you so I’m not going into my things.

I felt that over the 18 month time period the parents began to place me more as a fellow parent and a ‘friend’ who knew and understood their child but just happened to be conducting a study. For example, during the final interviews two of the parents independently showed me some documentation with very personal details about their child’s experiences with the school, of which I had no prior knowledge. This positional shift was ultimately evidenced by some follow up emails and texts from some of the parents after the data collection period had finished, in which they voluntarily told me of the achievements of their children. “Kurt just got the Economics prize at school” and “Oliver has made the 1st X1” and “April is lead violin in the symphony orchestra.”

It was interesting to observe how the position in which the students placed me, the researcher, changed over time. Despite my assurances that they were allowed to be as open as they liked, it felt like I was initially seen very firmly as ‘the adult’ and the

‘teacher.’ Most of the students were careful about how they spoke of particular teachers and schools and even their parents. Thus, any criticism would be somewhat restrained. By the end of the process comments were much more casual: for example, “My science teacher is a cow!” (Kurt’s reflection sheet, December 2008). The students began to see me as just ‘Louise,’ and I felt they had positioned me more as a ‘friend.’ This was demonstrated at the second of the informal afternoon teas where I had to remind the students that I was present as they began to talk about a particular girlfriend/boyfriend relationship in a way that made me rather uncomfortable, given I was not 14 years old.

The difference between some of the students’ demeanour in an individual interview and in a focus group interview was also interesting for me to observe. Nutbrown (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012) notes that an advantage of the focus group for her study was that “members of the group revisited their own comments and their own assumptions in the light of what they heard from others” (p. 89). This was true for the focus groups for this study. There was agreement with each other, but also debate, and at times comments were retracted or participants exhibited some embarrassment about what they had said in front of the others. These young people were all very articulate, but some revealed more confidence in backing up their opinions in a group situation than did others. I observed the jostling for status that goes on in most groups of adolescents as they interacted with each other and this was particularly apparent in two of the focus group interviews (Bruce Wayne, Hubert Cumberlande and April; Marty, Astrid, Autumn Ashes and Kurt). Some of this is illustrated by the examples below.

Kurt: It’s like ... no one really cares about finding out how someone’s brain makes them smart.

Marty: Oh but it could be interesting as long as you don’t spend too long on each part.

Autumn Ashes: Because we were like the music class last year

Astrid: Music class last year

Autumn Ashes: Bar a few

Astrid: Bar a few (laughs).

Bruce Wayne: Um, I listen to my family, my friends, my – there's a counsellor at school, there's the careers staff, there's my form teacher, my teachers in that subject that I am not doing so well, um my dean, my youth leaders.

Hubert Cumberland: Do you go to all those people? (laughter from others).

Fontana and Frey's (2005) challenge of the "interview society" in Western cultures (see the earlier section in this chapter, on interviews) was a consideration for me during data collection procedures. Although I attempted to encourage students to express their own opinions in as honest a way as possible, I did wonder if some responses from some of these adolescents were 'parroting' what their parents or teachers had said to them at some stage. These responses may have been influenced by the position in which they placed me – for example, if it was as an adult and an educator. The idea of an 'authentic voice' is debated by Alldred and Burman (2005) who remind us that:

... an interview cannot be seen as an expression of the interviewee's own 'authentic voice', but as generated through such 'filters' as the participants' perceptions of the situation, the research focus, interview questions, likely audience and interpretation, as well as the structural constraints they face and their personal values and biographies. (p. 181)

Further, personal values for these students were primarily modelled by their parents so I needed to be careful in interpreting some of the interview material as being wholly from the students' perspective. For example, it could be interpreted that Oliver Stone was rephrasing parental views in this comment:

I guess it's just the bigger picture because if you do well at school then you open more opportunities for yourself when you're older and you have more choices to do things; jobs and yeah just keeping your options open for when you go to university.

However, I was aware of a dichotomy in that these students were highly able and articulate and they could be said to be expressing beliefs that they had constructed as a result of varying experiences and, as such, should not be ignored.

The teachers' authentic voices were constrained at times too. I felt that they too positioned me as the educational expert in the field of gifted and talented education and several of their responses pointed to the need to demonstrate that they were using 'good teaching practice' for high ability students.

Well, not necessarily because even the programme that we run here sort of has a, is a level above, generally, what is expected of students in Year 9 level.
(Teacher of Astrid)

Yep, well as a form teacher, as soon as I created these results from their core subjects, I went to the Dean and identified and said, look, this boy isn't achieving well and he's in the top band class, ah you need to know about this. And I've also informed the person in charge of gifted and talented.
(Teacher of Bruce Wayne)

Some teachers may have been further inhibited because of their professional loyalties to their schools and colleagues and were careful in their responses at times, wanting to ensure confidentiality before allowing themselves to be totally honest.

Okay, to be honest, I actually feel that – and this is confidential obviously isn't it?
(Teacher of April)

There are ethical dilemmas in establishing the kind of collaborative relationships I was aiming for, particularly in terms of the confidentiality and privacy issues required from such a study. I needed to weigh this up as I considered whether I was intruding into the lives of these participants in ways that I had not envisaged (such as giving advice on how to communicate with schools) and still adhere to honesty and trust in all relationships. Punch (2009) advises that "ethical issues saturate all stages of the research process." (p. 50). I was confident that the positive effects of establishing a close collaborative relationship, whereby participants were able to discuss their

concerns and ask for advice from a 'knowledgeable friend,' were within the boundaries of responsible ethical practice.

Tools of inquiry: Data analysis

The analyst ... offers an interpretative account of what it means for these participants to have these concerns in this particular context.
(Reid et al., 2005, p. 22)

Phenomenological data analysis

The purpose of a phenomenological analysis is to try to understand the essential meaning of what is being studied. The process involves reflection, clarification and discovering the essences of the lived experience. This reflective analysis is done by recovering the meaning units or themes that are aspects of that experience (van Manen, 1990). However, van Manen reminds us that "phenomenological themes are not generalization, metaphorically speaking they are more like knots in the web of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus lived through as meaningful wholes" (p. 90). These themes allow us to produce the rich descriptions that form the basis of analysis.

Reaching a thematic understanding is not a process bound by rules; rather, the aim is to make something of the text based data through a progression of "insightful invention, discovery or disclosure ... a free act of 'seeing' meaning" (van Manen, 1990, p.79). In addition, the phenomenologist must be aware of the need to differentiate between themes that may be incidental to the phenomenon and those that are essential themes around which the final description will be woven. This is perhaps the most difficult task for the researcher: to determine which themes are so essential that in the eyes of these participants, they make the phenomenon what it is.

While keeping in mind the van Manen philosophy behind a phenomenological analysis, I was aware that I needed a structure on which to base the analysis for my study. After a search of the literature I turned to Moustakas (1994) and to the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method of Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). Both of these approaches fitted with the constructivist-interpretivist

orientation I wanted to bring to analysis. A blend of these two methods of analysis guided the process I eventually used.

Moustakas (1994) sets out specific steps that are required for analysis, beginning with the requirement that the researcher describe personal experiences with the phenomenon, as I have done in Chapter One. This is in line with the phenomenological idea of bracketing, which asks the researcher to set aside such experiences as much as possible both in the data collection period and during analysis. The researcher lists significant statements from the data and works towards a horizontalisation of the data which is a process of reduction, of developing a list of non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements. These statements are grouped into meaning units or themes. The researcher then attempts to write a “textural description” of “what” the participants believe the phenomenon to be about, including exact quotes. Next the researcher writes a “structural description” which describes “how” the participants experience the phenomenon – what it is like for them in particular settings or contexts. Finally, a composite description is developed which is the “essence” of the experience for the participants, a weaving together into the rich description that reflects on the lived realities of the phenomenon for these people.

IPA has at its core Heidegger’s hermeneutic notion of ‘appearing’ (Smith et al., 2009) in which there is a phenomenon that needs to be illuminated and it is the work of the researcher that enables this to emerge. As with all phenomenological analysis, there is a “double hermeneutic” (p. 35) in IPA, in that the researcher makes sense of what the participant says, who in turn is making sense of the phenomenon that is being studied.

The process for IPA is similar to that of the steps for analysis by Moustakas (1994), in that a personal description is the first step, followed by a thorough reading of all the transcripts, the sorting into emergent themes, a search for connections across themes and then a reduction process of looking for recurrent patterns across themes. At this stage, IPA suggests clustering themes together, putting like with like, and forming super-ordinate themes. A super-ordinate theme is one that could be said to be present in all or nearly all of the participant interviews. There could, however, still be variation, as the same super-ordinate theme could look considerably different in statements from different participants (Smith et al., 2009). IPA adheres to the belief that analysis should revolve around substantial extracts that are taken directly from

the data and this reflects the importance of the participants being experts on their own experience. This resonated with my knowledge claim and further drew me to the IPA process. It aims to focus on an idiographic study of what is distinct to individuals but also on what is shared, on commonalities across groups. The analysis process is interpretative but it does require the researcher to “reduce the complexity of data through rigorous and systematic analysis” (Reid et al., 2005).

Focusing on some specific steps of analysis provided me with the manageability I needed to conduct the analysis, but I was also aware that any qualitative analysis process should be dynamic and involve constant engagement with the data. The act of writing up itself is an important part of analysis in qualitative studies: “It is not separate from thinking, from analysis” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 299).

Interpretations are sometimes clarified through the process of writing. Writing can be a way of thinking that can be more powerful than simply sorting data into categories. Ideas evolve, while one writes, that may not have been thought about previously (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Above all, I needed to keep in mind that “a phenomenological description is always *one* interpretation, and no single interpretation of human experience will ever exhaust the possibility of yet another complimentary, or even potentially *richer* or *deeper* description” (van Manen, 1990, p. 31).

The next section describes the steps carried out for the data analysis for this study.

Process of analysis

Analysis was on-going throughout the data collection process, as befits the qualitative, phenomenological approach. I engaged in memo writing in a research diary after each interview, which was part of my very early analysis. These notes recorded some of my initial feelings about the way the interview had progressed, about the tone of the interview, how the interviewee had responded to my questions and early wonderings about the understandings expressed about the main research questions. These early ideas contributed to the meaning units or themes that were developed later. For example, one thought I noted down was:

Maybe I should at this stage keep my analysis to open coding and use it to inform the future data collection; keep in mind some themes that

begin to arise but don't see these as definite, final – need to be continually reflecting and taking note of recurring themes along the way. (Research diary, 13/11/08)

Interview data was transferred from the digital voice recorder to the computer and sent to a professional transcriber for transcription, as I knew that I was not a proficient enough typist to transcribe this number of interviews efficiently. Once I received the completed transcripts at regular intervals, I read these while listening to the recordings. I checked for any errors and familiarised myself with the data as part of the further initial analysis process. I kept hard copies of the interview transcripts for each student and those of their parents and teachers in folders, along with their reflection sheets. I originally made coding notes on the hard copies looking for patterns, themes, significant statements – a form of open coding to familiarise myself with the data as much as possible between the first and second, and the second and third interviews. I produced mind maps on paper with my original thoughts about tentative thematic units (see Appendix 8) and began some early clustering together of meaning units.

I then turned to the computer software programme, NVivo. This proved to be a useful organisational tool for me because of the large number of interview transcripts that I had to sort through and code. I imported all my transcripts into the NVivo programme and was then able to begin the process of horizontalisation of the data, sorting the data into emerging meaning units as per the steps recommended by Moustakas' method (1994) and IPA. In NVivo the first group of themes one selects are called 'Free Nodes.' There are often a large number of these as the researcher looks through the whole data set and carefully selects any meaning unit that may be of importance in the analysis. For example, my original list of Free Nodes from just the parent participants' transcripts totalled 48 (see Appendix 9). At this stage I was loath to leave out anything that I thought may have some importance to my final analysis so I included more than I rejected. Codes such as 'family links to intelligence' and 'time management' made it as Free Nodes in the first round of coding, although they were later reconfigured or rejected.

Next, I began a reduction process of trying to cluster together meaning units so that there was little repetition or over lapping. These meaning units were listed as 'Tree

Nodes' in the NVivo programme. These Tree Nodes formed the basis of my super-ordinate themes. The two phenomena of 'achievement' and 'underachievement' were Tree Nodes (Appendix 10). I also developed four initial super-ordinate themes around the lived experience of being gifted and talented, that emerged from the data at this stage. I produced a Thematic Map (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to help me make sense of these themes (see Appendix 11). The data from the Free Nodes were re-visited and a reduction process followed to look for recurrent patterns among these original meaning units. For example, 'Feelings about being smart' and 'Original thinker' collapsed into the theme 'On being gifted and talented.' I went back to the data and re-read all the transcripts and reflection sheets, looking for any other significant statements that might fit with the super-ordinate themes that were being considered.

The next stage of the analysis, in line with Moustakas' (1994) steps, was to try to write a textural description of what the participants understood the phenomena of interest, in this case achievement and underachievement, to be about. I looked for significant statements from the students, parents and teachers, from the data that I had coded in the Tree Nodes. Smith et al. (2009) suggest that a graphic representation of the decisions being made about the themes that are emerging can be helpful and I did find that putting the significant statements and their related properties into table form was helpful for me (see an example of this in Appendix 12). As well as making memos on the table of significant statements I had also been taking notes of conceptual drivers that I felt might help guide the analysis, as I read the transcripts and selected the statements. Using extensive excerpts from the data in the form of the significant statements that I had chosen, I began to write the textural description. This part of the analysis is structured within a collective case study approach (see Chapter Three) in that an analysis of understandings across the student group, the parent group and the teacher group was completed. However, while completing the reduction process I was also aware of divergence and tried to "maintain some level of focus on what is distinct" (Reid et al., 2005, p. 20).

The steps for analysis suggested by Moustakas (1994) move the researcher on to the process of describing how the participants experience the phenomena in the settings and context within which they find themselves. I saw this structural description as being about the lived experiences of these adolescents as gifted and talented students

in New Zealand schools. It was the act of writing the textural description (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) and of reading and re-reading the data that led me to this understanding. In the early stages of my research, I was focusing my analysis on the factors that influenced understandings about achievement and underachievement and although I still saw this as important, I began to realise that the ‘how’ in Moustakas’ (1994) analysis step, that was emerging from my data, was much more than just about factors. It was about the lived realities for these students as they experienced schooling in the cultural milieu of New Zealand. This part of the analysis, the structural description, focuses on context and setting.

In looking again at my thematic map with the super-ordinate themes that I had originally chosen, I found that I could collapse several of these into the one major super-ordinate theme for the structural description, underneath which lay three sub-themes. I went back to the data, to the Tree Nodes with significant statements that I had already sorted, and to the transcripts and reflection sheets, and began to re-look at significant statements that would reflect the themes I was aiming to present. This reflects an iterative approach to analysis, in that I visited and revisited the data repeatedly in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the text. I again used a table (see Appendix 13) to help with my thinking and with the linking of statements with related properties. Further sub-themes emerged from this search of the data as common threads became obvious and because reflections on the sense-making of the participants were on-going.

While I was focusing on the commonality of the participants’ lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994), I was also wanting to include an idiographic focus and so decided to present some anecdotal narratives as reconstructed life stories (van Manen, 1990). Thus, for each of the sub themes I was developing, I reflected on which of the adolescents I would weave a story around, to illustrate their experience in relation to a theme. Once I made these decisions I selected significant statements from these students and began to construct their narrative around these, and the statements of their parents and teachers. This was part of the ‘sense-making,’ both for myself in analysis, and for describing the findings to the reader. I then proceeded to write the structural description around how these participants experienced being gifted and talented in the context of a New Zealand school setting.

The final stage of analysis involved a reflective process of weaving together a composite description of the “essential, invariant structure (or essence)” (Creswell, 2007, p. 62) of being in the world of school for these young gifted and talented adolescents. The aim of this part of the phenomenological analysis process is rich description so that the reader can better understand what it is really like (Creswell, 2007; van Manen, 1990) for this group of gifted and talented learners experiencing their particular realities in the socio-cultural milieu within which they find themselves.

The distinction between writing up and analysis is not definitive and I found that I could relate to Smith et al. (2009) when they noted that “some extracts will seem richer or more illuminating and so one finds oneself needing to say more about them” (p. 110). It also became apparent that I needed to produce several drafts of the Findings sections as the tendency to be more descriptive in my first attempt was obvious on the first reading of this and I found that I became more analytical in my interpretations as I re-drafted the chapters. Further, it was at this stage that I realised I needed to begin to “draw upon existing theoretical concepts to assist in the development and elucidation of these themes” (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006, p. 116); in other words by making sense of my findings in relation to the literature. The bracketing condition was not always adhered to, I realised, as I re-read some of the initial writing, and I felt that I needed to re-think some of my interpretations while withholding some of my own assumptions. However, Larkin et al. (2006) adhere to the view that IPA can be informed not only by previous research but also by prior experience and understandings. Thus, there was an attempt to achieve a balance during analysis between bracketing prior assumptions in my interpretations and prefacing the co-construction of meaning-making with the participants.

Trustworthiness in qualitative, phenomenological research

There are several terms in qualitative research to denote the ways in which researchers are tasked with ensuring that findings from their studies are credible (Creswell, 2007). Validity, credibility, and authenticity are words often used, but I favour the term ‘trustworthiness’ as this encapsulates the responsibility I have to my participants to

reflect the trust they have put in me to interpret their stories and to then present these to a reader.

Qualitative researchers have the ability to use a wide range of methodological strategies in order to explore a phenomenon, which can bring together multiple voices and perspectives. Researchers will use several methods of data collection, and engage different groups of participants in one study in order to achieve triangulation.

Triangulation is considered to be necessary to strengthen the trustworthiness of any qualitative research study, in that a reader can be assured that any interpretation could be repeated, but that at the same time there are always different realities for each description of a case (Stake, 2006). Denzin and Lincoln (2005a) describe triangulation when they state that “the combination of multiple methodological practices, empirical materials, perspectives, and observers in a single study is best understood, then, as a strategy that adds rigour, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to any inquiry” (p. 5).

I endeavoured to follow the tenets of this statement for my study but I lean towards Richardson and St Pierre’s (2005) concept of crystallization, rather than triangulation, as the concept that best suits my understanding of trustworthiness. Crystallization allows for the notion that there are many different interpretations of one event or many varying ways of exploring a phenomenon. In the same way a crystal reflects light in a myriad of ways through its prism, it “recognizes that there are far more than ‘three sides’ by which to approach the world. We do not triangulate; we crystallize” (Richardson & St Pierre, 2005, p. 963). The idea that there were a myriad of ways that the researcher can ‘validate’ findings and that neither a single truth or one premised on three points would suffice, resonated with me as a way of ensuring any interpretation would honestly reflect, or crystallize, these multiple understandings.

In order to achieve this crystallization I employed different data collection methods for this study. I conducted individual and focus group semi-structured interviews, collected student protocol writings and looked at documents. I also engaged with the student participants on two informal social occasions. I had three different participant groups in my study allowing for a diversity of perspectives. I aimed to produce in-depth descriptions of the phenomena of interest, that were not prefaced on single

truths but rather on complex interpretations made up of multiple truths, validated by the texts themselves (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005).

Yardley (2000) emphasises four principles for ensuring that research is trustworthy in what she sees as addressing the essential qualities of qualitative research (p. 219). Her principles are recommended by Smith, Flowers and Larkin in their 2009 text on IPA and, as I followed an IPA process for my analysis, it is appropriate that I discuss here these principles and their relation to my study.

Sensitivity to context is the first principle that Yardley (2000) advocates researchers need to consider. In a phenomenological study sensitivity to one's interview participants from the outset is seen as important, beginning with the way access is negotiated, continuing through the actual interview process, and through to the analysis process when a sensitivity to context must be respected to ensure that any meanings interpreted from the data are indeed co-constructed. Gordon and Mutch (2006) and Patton (2002) warn us that any power imbalance between the researcher and the researched needs to be considered. If we see understandings as socially and culturally constructed, then it is those with dominant views relative to that time and place who may have the greatest control over any re-presentation of meaning. This could be seen to be the case in this project in terms of the relative positions held by the participants and the researcher, even though the focus for this study is firmly on a co-construction, between researcher and participants, around the meaning of a particular phenomenon. I was aware that as the final interpreter of the text, and by adhering to a constructivist-interpretivist approach, I had a responsibility to present findings that would be viewed as trustworthy and authentic by the participants, who relinquished some of their control at the analysis stage. I needed to remain aware of the context from whence the findings came. IPA will always include a large number of extracts from the participants as evidence that any interpretation has been made aptly and I endeavoured to do so in this study so that a reader may judge the appropriateness of any interpretation.

The second principle for ensuring trustworthiness, which Yardley (2000) claims is important, is that of commitment and rigour. Commitment is seen as the way in which one conducts an interview with respect and care for the interviewee and in the consideration given to the data analysis process. I believe I paid careful attention to

both the interviews and the analysis so that my participants were respected and treated with honesty, as I have discussed previously. Rigour “refers to the thoroughness of the study” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 181). Are the in-depth interviews conducted with the right balance of familiarity and distance? Is there consistency between interviews? The analysis should be systematic and thorough including overall themes as well as idiographic examples and include sufficient supporting extracts from participants for each theme. This should be evident in the description of the study. I have included examples of the interview schedules for this study and used numerous quotes from participants in my Findings as I have attempted to demonstrate rigour in this research study.

Thirdly, the principle of transparency and coherence is suggested by Yardley (2000). The process by which the research was carried out should be easy for the reader to follow, with details such as how the participants were selected, how the interviews were conducted and how the analysis was carried out all carefully described. Transparency is about disclosing all aspects of the research process, including any assumptions or actions that might affect the process. Coherence refers to the extent to which the whole study presents a coherent argument and also to the fit that the theoretical approach has with the particular study. In this case, coherence would mean that there is evidence that “phenomenological and hermeneutic sensibility should be apparent in the write-up” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 182). A phenomenological theoretical framework has clearly underpinned both the methodology and the analysis for this research and this has been made clear throughout the writing up of the research.

The last broad principle that could be said to support trustworthiness in a study using IPA, according to Yardley (2000), is that of impact and importance. A study may align well with each of the other principles but a major aim for any researcher should be to make some contribution to the field in which the research is placed. The quality of any study needs to be judged on the impact it makes. Does the study bring value to the field by informing it and perhaps leading to improvement in practice?

Creswell (2007) adds a further question when he asks if the author of the study is reflexive throughout. A researcher conducting a qualitative, phenomenological study needs to be continually reflexive as he or she carries out the research, analyses the data and writes up the study in order for trustworthiness to be properly achieved.

Chapter Summary

Cresswell (2007) views the actions that a researcher takes to collect and analyse data as a sequence of activities that are interrelated. The interrelated actions that were taken for this study are described in this chapter, with a view to upholding Yardley's (2000) principle of transparency and coherence about how the study was conducted. It is recognised that my understandings about methodology are in line with those of Clough and Nutbrown (2012) who maintain that methodological awareness is not contained within one chapter but permeates throughout the thesis. As a researcher, I remained 'methodologically aware' of the overall design of this study which is characterised by a qualitative, phenomenological framework. This overarching 'methodological umbrella' led to the choice of particular strategies of inquiry and tools of inquiry. In addition, within this framework, ethical dilemmas had to be negotiated in the design process and addressed throughout the research in the collection and analysis of data.

The following three chapters encompass the presentation of the findings from this research study, beginning with understandings from the participants about the phenomena of achievement and underachievement, and culminating in rich description that aims to bring to light the essence of what it is like to be gifted and talented in the socio-cultural milieu of the New Zealand school.

Chapter Four:

Understandings about Achievement and Underachievement

“I think it’s relative, whether you achieve, overachieve, underachieve. Relative to what – is it the standard that a teacher sets, is it a standard that a test is, is it a standard that a parent sets?”
(Bruce Wayne’s parent)

Introduction

This chapter summarises the responses given to the research question for the study:

What are the understandings that gifted and talented students, their parents and their teachers have about the achievement and underachievement of gifted learners?

It presents a textural description (see Chapter Three under the section on analysis) of the way the particular phenomena are viewed by each of the three groups, as identified through the ‘detective work’ and interpretative lens of the researcher. The analysis presented here aims to make sense of the participants’ own sense making and to move between description and possible interpretations. This descriptive analysis endeavours to keep in mind the tenets of a phenomenological analysis, as mooted by Reid et al. (2005), which “holds the view that participants are experts on their own experiences” (p. 20), that substantial excerpts from the data are included and that the analysis is aware of convergence and divergence, of what is distinct to individuals as well as commonalities across groups (Smith et al., 2009).

The chapter is structured to present the findings from each of the three different groups separately. The intention is to present the data and be true to the voices of the participants from each group and as such there may be an overlap of ideas, which is purposefully maintained. The perspectives which the participants held about similarities or differences in understandings across groups are also explored. The chapter summary highlights the repeated ideas and those unique to different groups. In brief, the focus of this chapter is to present findings in answer to the

phenomenological question ‘how do these participants make sense of the phenomena’?

At the ‘heart’ of the study: The student participants

The chapter begins with brief profiles of the 11 adolescents, to contextualise the ‘sense making’ of the participants. In introducing these young people I have used anecdotal narratives from the initial parent interviews, to provide an insight into the personalities and interests of this diverse group of adolescents as seen through the eyes of their parent (who were all mothers) when the students were 12 or 13 years old. Although the 11 students are similar in ethnicity, socio-economic position and ability levels, I encourage the reader to see them as a heterogeneous group in many ways. They have strongly individual personalities, differing interests and family situations.

April

She’s come from being a very, very, quiet, insecure um ... child to one that’s becoming more confident. Um in some forums she can be quite outgoing and in others not. Um ... incredibly conscientious and diligent and wanting to please and ah very musical. Ah, sporting ... yeah just a really good all-round kid. Deeply, deeply, caring and sensitive about others.

April is a young girl with natural abilities in music – she is particularly talented at playing the violin – and she also loves ballet. She couples this with a strong work ethic in both her musical endeavours and her academic work. She has always achieved highly in her schoolwork, according to her mother, and puts 100% into everything she does. She is self-motivated and driven, her mother reports, and likes to succeed. She would never dream of not doing her best at all times and is a deep thinker. She is very sensitive to others’ comments about her, or about other peers and will say if she thinks something is not right or fair. She can feel stressed and upset if she feels there is injustice, even if it is not being directed at her.

I remember a couple of times she’d get into the car and sometimes she’d just burst into tears. And I’d think, oh, what’s gone wrong. And more often than not it wasn’t her, it was, it’s the way another child had been spoken to by a teacher and she just felt it was out of order.

So, yeah, it's been ... it's been quite hard to sort of help her ... grow through that and grow with it and you know.

Her mother describes her as a “worrier.” Her friends tend to be mainly interested in musical or artistic activities but she had been in a more “sporty” class during intermediate, which her mother says didn't always work for her, socially. There had been some “bullying incidents” in the last few months of intermediate school, according to her mother, and this was translated into what may have been a stress-related illness. April was learning to cope with such incidents.

But she said to us last Sunday, she said, I can understand really where they're coming from and when they, you know, build more maturity, I think they'll look back on it and regret it.

April's older brother is a highly gifted young man and her parents say that they were aware that they had to be careful with comparisons.

Astrid

She is, um, quite an effervescent little girl. She is full of life, um, has lots of interests, loves music, um, has a really wide circle of friends, um, from all walks of life.

Astrid is a young girl who is talented musically. She plays the piano, the flute, is involved in singing groups and has dancing lessons outside of school. Her mother says music is her “absolute passion.” She remembers Astrid as having a strong vocabulary from an early age and using “bigger words than most children her age.” She is quite intense about her areas of interest and goes into things in great depth.

She has always been creative and this has sometimes led to her being considered somewhat odd by her primary school peers, her mother reports.

... and sort of almost a bit of an oddball at some, at some points in her life. She sometimes didn't really fit in at W school because she ... sometimes felt, we felt like she was sort of on a bit of a higher plane than some of the other kids in her class, she didn't always relate well to them, um, or they didn't relate well to her. Sort of – eccentricity sometimes. She's quite eccentric from time to time.

Her mother recounts a period where Astrid shaped a world for herself in which she created people from the “Wiggly Fish” world. This fantasy world lasted from when she was nine until 12 years of age.

Astrid had some periods at primary school when she was quite unhappy and not achieving well. Her mother puts this down to her treatment by a particular teacher in Year 4. Astrid began to believe that she was “no good at anything” and she thought that no matter what she did, people wouldn’t like it, so she stopped participating. According to her mother, this feeling lasted for two years until Astrid began to feel comfortable at Skye Intermediate, where she was put in the high ability music class. Her mother said after a few weeks “we had our old Astrid back.” She reports that Astrid now has very high expectations of herself, likes a challenge and is competitive against herself, always striving to improve.

Astrid lives with her parents and her younger sister. Both parents work outside the home.

Autumn Ashes

... she’s probably very vivacious, full of energy, um, probably a rather in-your-face sort of kid, yeah, she’s always there. But underneath it all she’s quite sensitive and little small issues worry her.

Autumn Ashes is an avid reader and according to her mother was reading the alphabet at three years of age. She taught herself to read before she went to school and continues to have a real love of books and literature. Her mother reports that she has always been very good with language, both written and oral. Autumn Ashes has a strong musical interest and she is very able in this area. She also enjoys different forms of dance and takes several dance classes out of school.

Her mother sees Autumn Ashes as being very social at age 12, but this wasn’t always the case. Primary school-aged peers tended to think she was “strange and weird.” Her mother thinks it was because “her mind was working at a different level.” She is still seen as slightly eccentric by some peers. There were several bullying incidences during her primary school years, some quite serious, that appear to have had quite an effect on her. Understandably, her mother reports that she was not happy at primary

school and “we were on a, really on a slippery slope downwards, I’d say, from about Year Five.”

During her primary school years, Autumn Ashes had often not worked to her ability, her mother felt. She frequently said the work was too easy. Her mother states that her self-esteem “started to really plummet” and she seemed to think that everyone was always on to her about whatever she did in the classroom. Her mother felt that she started to do just enough to get by and no more, during her later years at primary school.

However, at the end of Year 8 at Skye Intermediate she was very happy at school and had a good social network of friends. Autumn Ashes has two younger sisters. Her mother and father both work.

Bruce Wayne

Um ... self starter. Um ... running before he could walk. Inquisitive about a 100 million, thousand, questions – what, where, how, when, why, – independence, active, energetic, you name it.

Bruce Wayne was always very curious, wanting to find out things. His mother remembers that he would become obsessed about particular subject areas such as space or pre-historic animals, and would read all he could about the topic. He learned to read and write at an early age. His academic strengths at the time of the interview were in the maths and science areas. Bruce Wayne is a talented sportsman and picks up any sport he chooses to play, very easily. He is a top tennis player in his province. His mother sees him as being competitive in both sport and schoolwork, but more against himself than others. He is honest about his efforts and seems to accept if he did not do as well as he had hoped.

... and he would measure himself against the benchmark that he had set for himself and he would be either happy or not as happy with what he had or had not achieved. And he would be very honest, you know, ‘I didn’t work hard enough. I didn’t do this. I should have done that.’

His mother says that he is philosophical about failure. There have been times during his schooling when he was “cruising” (his mother’s term), but still managing to achieve at a high level. She noted that he often didn’t like standing out from his peers, and would not take up opportunities if it meant he stood out. He has flourished in the streamed class at Year 7 and 8, where his mother thinks he is more comfortable because there are others “who are definitely smarter than him.” Bruce Wayne has a strong sense of humour and at primary school was sometimes seen as the “class clown.” His relationships with his peers have always been positive.

Bruce lives with his mother and his step father, both of whom work in professional careers, and a younger sister.

Hubert Cumberlandale

Um, she is ah ... very determined. She is focussed like nobody I’ve ever known. She is highly organised and structured approach to everything she does. Ah, of the smarts, physical smart would be her strongest one by miles – she’s very physically able in everything that she does.

Huge risk taker. Absolutely has never worried what anybody else thought, like to stand out, like to be different – quite exceptional that way.

Hubert Cumberlandale is a young girl who is exceptionally talented in the sporting area. She has represented her province in age-group cross country, multi-sport, hockey and cricket, is a New Zealand age group surf life-saving champion and she won four sporting cups at the end of her time at Skye Intermediate. Her mother reports that when Hubert was younger she was told that she probably had ADHD but her mother was not convinced and believes it was her excessive physical energy that led to that assumption. Her mother says that if the energy is channelled into sporting activities, then Hubert copes perfectly well. She has an “ants in her pants type of energy” and “gets into a bit of mischief and stuff.” She is a girl who needs to be busy; she also plays three musical instruments. She does not appear to have problems with organising her time, despite her heavy load of activities. Her mother gives the example of Hubert colour coding her diary in order to keep track of her homework, trainings and meetings.

Hubert achieves at an above average level academically. Her mother labels her as able, with a good memory, and notes that she “follows processes well.” She sometimes struggles with reading. She says Hubert is a “natural leader.” Hubert is invariably selected as the captain of teams. She does have difficulty settling to sleep at night and needs techniques to calm herself enough to be able to go to sleep.

She did not have many friends at primary school, according to her mother, who says this was because “she was just so different from the rest of them. They were all doing Barbies and gymnastics and she was climbing on the school roof retrieving tennis balls for kids.”

Hubert has two older sisters, both academically very able. Her father and her mother are both in full-time work.

Kurt

... he’s got a huge and a very great sense of humour and he is quite a comedian among his friends. And he just has this astounding memory, because one of the things he likes doing the most is pulling out funny wee bits of information, like ... what – are you more likely to get hit on the head by a coconut tree or killed by a shark – and Kurt can tell you.

Kurt has a wide range of interests, from reading and learning about a variety of topics, to playing the guitar, attending Sea Scouts and participating in several sports. His mother says he is always “right up on world events.” He forms his own opinions about current affairs and likes to discuss these with his mother and her partner at home. He thinks quickly and likes to get his ideas down on the page, which can lead to less than tidy work. He uses an advanced vocabulary. He is competitive in his school work and likes to compare his results with others in his class. Yet his mother also says he will often say he is “useless” at science, for example, but will still attain a high mark. He is particularly able in the maths area. “Maths just seems to be a piece of cake,” his mother maintains. She sees maths and his ability with computers as being his areas of talent.

There was some frustration for Kurt during his primary and intermediate school years when he felt he was not being challenged in his maths and he became bored. He was not placed in the top maths class at Skye and he put this down to his difficulty with

sitting timed tests, at which he did not do well, according to his mother. However, he told his mother that he ended up doing the problems for the top maths class students who would pay him with money for visits to the canteen.

His mother believes that he has no problems with peer relationships and she notes that “well, he’s all different with all the different children.” Kurt is an only child, who at the time of the interview was living with his mother and her partner. During the course of the study this relationship broke up.

Lewis

Um, he’s very expressive, um, when he gets to know people and can be very funny and very dramatic, um, but very shy on – and and um reclining on on first meeting people. He he comes across as very um quiet and almost vacant or quite shy, you know, not not sort of as a as a um you know particularly articulate or anything [laughs] it takes a while.

Lewis is a creative thinker whom his mother says has an interesting sense of humour which has been enjoyed by both his peers and his teachers. He is someone who is happy to participate at all times, even though he may not be the best at an activity. His mother calls him “biddable” and “happy to go with the flow.” He tends to come up with strange creative solutions which his teachers have often commented on in the past. He is academically very able and he received the top academic award for boys in his final year at Skye Intermediate as well as being awarded an academic scholarship to attend his high school.

He enjoys drama and is very adept on the computer and although he is a competent reader, his mother reports that he rarely reads books but reads avidly on the computer to find out information. He has always done well at school and enjoyed school and the company of his peers. He likes to be busy and takes part in several sports as well as playing the piano. His mother says he can ‘blow up’ if he feels things get on top of him.

Um, he has his, his odd moments, mainly with his mother probably, of volatility and, um, has in the past had – had volatile moments. Um, but he gets over it quickly and moves on. He’ll explode and then move

on. And usually it's, it's, it's probably stress-related, with too many, you know, things being piled up on him.

Lewis' parents are both professionals but his mother was not working outside the home at the time of the study.

Marty

... he's very sensitive and a deep thinker ... Um, he's very gentle and very caring and, um, he's soft [laughs], doesn't like getting hurt or anything.

Marty is a young person with a gentle nature whom his mother remembers as being an advanced reader from an early age. He becomes very focused on an area of interest and finds out everything there is to know about that area. At the time of the interview with his mother he was passionate about cricket.

... when he was little he used to absolutely love and know every single thing about wild animals, these animals that I'd never heard of whereas at the moment he's into cricket and he just reads cricket and watches cricket and plays cricket and so he's very passionate about whatever he's into.

His mother says he has an amazing ability to retain knowledge and his comprehension of advanced concepts is strong. Marty does not seem to need a lot of close friends; he is happy with one or two, who are usually of similar ability to him although his mother states that he will relate to people of any age and is particularly confident when talking to adults. He will speak in front of a large group without being too nervous, but is very sensitive to change in his life. His mother says they always need to prepare him if things are going to be different from what he expects. She says he spends a lot of time watching when he encounters new situations, before taking part. In his primary school years he has always done very well and he loves the extra-curricular activities such as the Future Problem Solving programme, creative writing and debating.

Marty has two younger sisters. His mother works part-time and both she and his father are in professional careers.

Mr Bubbles

Well, he is a very sporty child ... He's a very kind person. He always worries about everyone else and sorts everybody out, out. Um, yeah, he's just, he's a really good kid.

Sport is Mr Bubbles' passion, especially football. He has been selected for numerous representative football teams, but his mother says he has a natural ability for all sports. He is also interested in science, likes Shakespeare and considers himself weak in maths, his mother reports. She says he is quite diverse in his interests. He does like to do well academically and would always make sure his work is handed in, even if it is at the last minute. He can get anxious if he has too much happening. He used to read all the time, but these days he prefers the computer at which his mother says he is a "whizz."

His parents were surprised when he was selected for the high ability class at Skye Intermediate because as his mother states, at primary school "it was just all negative things. So I was just blown away." He was always "on the ball" when he began school, wanting to learn things, but he became frequently bored at primary school, according to his mother, and started to get told off a lot for talking and being disruptive. He "got, like, an attitude." He received several awards for his sporting ability but none for academics. His mother recounts how she asked to see his PAT results at the end of his time at primary school and found that he consistently scored in the top 5%, something that had never been reported to his parents. She says that Mr Bubbles struggles with the idea of being a "nerd." His sporty friends give him some "grief" over this. However, his father (who was present for part of the interview) maintains that "he's got too much pride in himself, you know" to allow his work standards to drop.

Mr Bubbles was living with both his parents at the time of this interview, and his three younger brothers. His parents separated during the course of the study and his father moved overseas.

Oliver Stone

I often think with Oliver ... he's he's, he is that real, all-rounder kid. He's got natural talent and natural ability and he's got confidence, and you stuff them together and you've got this amazing package.

I think he's an easily gifted sportsman, certainly in the cricket side of things.

Oliver Stone is a very able sportsman with particular talent as a cricketer. Cricket is his passion. He has represented his province at the highest level and spends a great deal of time training and playing the game. He is also bright academically, his mother says, although the same passion is not evident for his school work. He was awarded a scholarship for high school as a result of his all-round abilities. His mother remarks that he is very particular in his mannerisms; he is neat, punctual and organised.

Oliver Stone has generally strong friendships with his peers but his mother does admit that there are times when "he can border on arrogant, egotistical behaviour." He does become stressed in his sporting pursuits as he feels that his team is relying on him to always achieve highly. As his mother realises, he is still just a 13 year old boy "trying to come off as a young man."

Oliver has usually achieved well at school, achieving high marks in tests, according to his mother, but she worried he may have "gone off the boil a bit" lately. She feels that he may have gone under the radar in terms of his academic work, partly because of the focus on his sporting abilities and partly because, as she said, "I was thinking A [elder brother] was our gifted child and Oliver was just a smart little boy, I think." Oliver himself was less than impressed at being placed in a high ability class at Skye Intermediate. When asked about his first day there, his mother reports he said, "Oh it was awful, the nerds! Nobody plays sport."

Oliver Stone's mother does not work outside the home and his father is a professional. He is the middle child of three boys.

Rambo

He is a real bookworm, um ... he's not an overly sort of sporty person, but he's a very deep thinker, very deep thinker.

But some of the things he comes up with I think, wow, you know, that's sort of what an adult would perhaps, a conversation you'd have with an adult.

Rambo is particularly interested in science, in how things work. He will spend time pulling objects apart to try and find out the intricacies of their workings. He loves to read and find out about things, is interested in world issues and can often look at issues from quite an original angle. His mother states that he is very persistent and that this doesn't always go down well with either his friends or sometimes his teachers. He can also be "lazy" and prone to procrastination, according to his mother. She considers him to be "bright" but reported that there had been several times during his primary school years when he had not achieved as well as he could. His relationships with his peers vary. His mother thinks that there is often an element of competitiveness in his dealings with peers. He has at times been teased for being "smart."

If he did really well, like when he got High Distinction in science and stuff; he said all his friends were sort of saying, 'well, you geek' and he wears glasses, so they said 'geeky four eyes ... you think you know it all' or something like that.

Rambo lives with his parents and one older brother whom his mother tells me has learning disabilities. His mother does not work outside the home.

What is achievement?

Understandings from the students

The students were confident and articulate in expressing their views about the concept of achievement. Although there was some divergence among the students' expressed beliefs, in-depth analysis showed that patterns across the 11 cases could be clustered into some common themes or meaning units (Moustakas, 1994). Thus findings from

the students' responses are divided into the following meaning units: the belief that achievement was measured against your own standard, that it was about doing your best, about putting in the effort, about results and about successfully understanding school curricula. While these are presented as discrete themes, it is understood that the lines are often blurred between one theme and another. It is recognised that not all responses fit solely into a specific meaning unit described here and that the themes overlap.

Measured by yourself

The predominant pattern that emerged from the students' responses was the belief that achievement was not something that could be measured by others but that a student would know in their own mind whether or not something constituted achievement.

Well ... it ... depends because ... you can obviously decide for yourself whether you think you have achieved highly or not, except high achieving is something which everyone has their own definition of ...
(Marty)

They felt that it was up to them to set their own expectations and achievement was measured against these, not those of parents or teachers. For instance, Mr Bubbles stated that achievement for him was "when I do something beyond my expectations." When the researcher prompted, "Not beyond others' expectations?" he was adamant that it was "Beyond mine." He didn't seem to feel that an expectation of achievement that was set by others was what achievement was about for him. As long as he surpassed his own expectations, then that was achievement.

Students stated that a sense of achievement was felt most strongly when they were able to beat their own score, or to do better in a task than they had done previously. Several students stressed that they didn't see achievement to be about competing with others, but that it was about a personal, individualistic view. Rambo's view of achievement was that "I think it's to better your own score, you know, your own ability to achieve highly." Hubert Cumberland had similar ideas.

So an achievement is sort of like yourself, yourself getting better – so, like beating your own goals, not like beating the person next to you or beating your best friend. It's beating what you've done previously.
(Hubert Cumberland)

Along with this view that achievement should be measured against one's own efforts, some students, like Kurt, stated that other people's opinions did not matter to them as long as they themselves felt they had achieved.

I feel I am, in my own opinion, I'm achieving. So I yeah, I don't care too much what people think.
(Kurt)

Most of these students admitted to being competitive in the sense that they to want improve their own scores, but even if this did not happen they still saw their own judgement as the one that any achievement should be measured against.

April could be seen to be expanding on the idea that achievement was measured against yourself, when she talked about an intensely personal view about how she saw the kind of achievement which she said she preferred to keep to herself.

Like everybody knows that you've achieved when they give you something tangible that everybody can see and, like, you get a cup or you get a certificate or something. But then there's, like, the sense of achievement, like you know when you have a really good thought or something, that's a sense of achievement for me.
(April)

This 'sense' of achievement that she couldn't really explain was not necessarily related to success in tests or to being acknowledged through extrinsic rewards. It could be as minor as a challenging thought or a new idea that no one else may know about, but that felt like an achievement to her. It was not the kind of achievement that she wanted to share with others, but was a satisfying feeling for her alone. It could be interpreted that this was related to her sense of self-worth.

Doing your best

Several of the students talked about achievement in terms of doing the best they could, no matter what their ability might be. This was also related to the idea of measuring the achievement against their own expectations, as students felt they would know themselves if they had achieved to the best of their ability. Both themes seemed to be about the students' beliefs that they set their own targets and judgements. The students talked about how "you know" if "you" had worked to the best of your ability,

locating this awareness within themselves rather than as something that had been assessed by someone else.

I think high achievement is when you know that that's the highest you could have gone to. That is like, that is like the limit of where you could have gone to and you know you couldn't have done better. I think that's achievement.

(Hubert Cumberland)

Well, obviously if you know that you've done your best you can get the best sense of achievement you can get, because – or you can't get a higher sense of achievement because you couldn't have gone higher than you did.

(Marty)

Several students situated achievement as the maximisation of abilities in a sporting context or some other form of extra-curricular activity, as well as looking at doing one's best in school tasks.

The idea that you had done your best seemed to be used by some students as a defence when a goal was not reached or a desired result was not attained. If you had “done your best” it was still achievement, even if you didn't actually win or get an Excellence. April thought that “a high achiever is someone who is not always the best at everything but is trying really hard.”

Maximising the abilities that you have is considered to be achievement, but this may not always mean being the best among one's peers. Doing your best was also closely linked with putting in an effort, as April alluded to above, and this theme is discussed in the next section.

Putting in the effort

These gifted adolescents frequently talked about effort, often in terms of studying hard or putting in the extra time in order to do well. They seemed to agree that achievement and effort should be linked. There was the implication from these students' responses that true achievement was only possible if one had worked hard. Lewis believed that “an achievement is getting something done that you had to work towards, to do,” while Autumn Ashes appeared to agree:

Yeah, if I had completely not tried at all and just done it with no effort then I can't really achieve much.
(Autumn Ashes)

Some believed that the sense of satisfaction in achievement would be greater if getting there had not been too easy.

But I don't think you would feel as good about it as if, if you had, um, like really worked for it and you were really knuckling down to get it and all your hard work had paid off.
(Hubert Cumberdale)

Autumn Ashes used the analogy below to explain her understanding of how an achievement is more valued if there has been effort to reach a goal. There was the implicit implication that if one had to 'sacrifice' for achievement to be reached, then it was worth more.

I guess it means more when you've had to really work for it. Like you know there's always the saying that if something, if you just get bought things, then you don't appreciate them as much, but when you have to save up and get them, that kind of thing about achievement. Like if you've really worked hard for it, it will be something really amazing.
(Autumn Ashes)

One student made the connection between natural ability and effort and believed that both were needed to achieve highly. He related this specifically to his area of talent, cricket.

There's a point where natural ability doesn't count for anything in cricket. Like obviously you've got to be talented, but then, if you don't work at it then you'll be good in the lower grades but then, as you get higher and higher it just demands a higher standard and if you're not improving then you're not gonna get anywhere.
(Oliver Stone)

He recognised that at a higher level of competition more than natural ability was needed to achieve. Several of these students seemed to identify with this, perhaps because they were used to the experience of being up against other able students or to

having challenges set for them at an advanced level. Effort, as well as ability, was required to meet such challenges.

April talked about the “really smart” students that didn’t always “get up there so much” because they didn’t display the same persistence as others who may actually be less able. April seemed to see that there was room for both natural ability and effort in achievement, even for someone as eminent as Einstein, whom she used to try to illustrate her point.

So a high achiever isn’t like Einstein – okay, he was a high achiever,
but you know he tried hard as well.
(April)

These students appeared to understand that in order to reach an elite level, effort was required, even if one did possess exceptional natural talents.

About results or marks

Despite the commonly held idea that achievement was something that was known and judged by oneself (the notion that could be said to link the previous three themes) many of the students understood achievement, especially in the school situation, to be about results. If this was the case, then achievement was judged by someone outside of themselves, usually a teacher.

Well at school you would normally get high marks in tests and you’d probably get some sort of indication from your teacher in reports and things. I mean it obviously makes it, ah confirms it, if you’re given an ‘A,’ so that system works.
(Marty)

Rambo seemed to agree when he stated that “you know when you’re doing well, I think, when you get things in on time and get a good mark.” Rambo’s comment implies that for his understanding of achievement there is a connection between the previous theme of putting in the effort (he sees the need to make the effort to get things in on time) and the theme about results (the good grade).

The responses on the student reflection sheets also strongly indicated that several students thought about achievement in terms of results. When asked how well each

student thought he or she was doing at school during that month, responses such as the two below were common:

I think I have done pretty well ... I got some good academic results.
(Lewis, Reflection Sheet)

I feel like I have done very well in my learning this year because my results which have come back are positive and/or better than I thought.
(Hubert Cumberlanddale, Reflection Sheet)

One possible interpretation of these comments is that these students see achievement as being about recognition from someone else, usually a teacher, which was represented by a mark or a grade or a commendation of some kind. Achievement was less about how a student may feel themselves and more about doing well in a test and being able to prove this with something tangible such as a mark or a trophy. As Lewis stated "... if it's high achievement, then I think someone else has got to tell you." However, a good result could also be seen as an affirmation of a student's own judgement about whether or not achievement had been reached.

It is also possible that Lewis and Hubert are simply accustomed to achievement being linked to good marks and are accepting of this. Other students showed a somewhat resigned knowledge of the power of the exam system in our schools, a system which deals in results, and how this presides over what is seen as achievement.

Well I guess with class work and things it sort of ends up being how well you do compared to others in exams and things, cos that's the way they're set I guess.
(Marty)

However, despite his belief that schools linked exam results to achievement, Marty also supported the idea that achievement should be about non-academic pursuits when he said, "Um, for me it's probably, I think, I think it would have to be in everything, because the school doesn't just do academic stuff."

Most of the students could see that good results were an indication of achievement. Results represented an external verification of success in school related tasks. Several

of these students were clearly influenced by this understanding when talking about achievement.

Successful understanding

Aligned with the responses that related to achievement being about results, a number of the students thought that achievement would be when there was successful learning of school-related concepts. Several talked about “understanding” in relation to achievement – it was achievement if you were able to understand the ideas being taught.

Well if you achieve in something it means that you have an understanding of it and you’ve learnt it, you know about it ... You’ve learned what you had to learn.
(Rambo)

April supported this idea when she talked about a high achiever as “someone who um understands what they’re doing.” Oliver believed he had achieved highly one week, when he noted that, “I feel like I am learning at a good rate because I am understanding things much better” (Oliver Stone, Reflection Sheet).

As with the focus on results, the students were well aware that “learning” was what school was about and thus if you understood a concept, if you had “learned” it, then that was achievement. They seemed to be intimating that if you had done what was expected of school, as defined by the school’s expectations and standards, then you were successful at ‘playing the game’ of school success.

So that you’re actually, like, learning things, cos generally it seems to be the point of school.
(Astrid)

This could be seen to be linked to an established belief that school was about understanding and learning “what you had to learn,” as Rambo pointed out, so achievement was when you had moved on from one learning stage to the next because you had understood the ideas.

Thus, contextually, students believed achievement was about the responsibility and the ability to meet the standards set within the schooling system of which they were a part.

The student group believed that achievement was about the expectations they themselves set and how their performance measured against these. They understood that to achieve was to do the best you could with your ability but that it was also important to put in the effort, to show persistence as well as to rely on a natural ability. Achievement was more valued if effort was used. Students did realise that achievement could be about the verification from others in terms of getting good marks and they acknowledged that this was predominant in a school setting. Achievement was related to success in learning the concepts that were presented to them. Their understandings could be represented in two dominant discourses – one relating to themselves and their own judgements and the other about external systems, expectations and judgements.

Understandings from the parents

The parent participants had some difficulty in verbalising their understandings of the concept of achievement. For example, two parents asked me “is this what you want?” during the discussion. Many chose to express their views in relation to their own child, in order to ground the concept in their own experiences. Inter-participant analysis of the data collected from this group showed that responses can be encompassed under three major meaning units: achievement is about doing the best you can with your ability, it is about putting in the effort and it is about being well-rounded. As with the student data, connections between the themes can be seen in several of the responses.

Doing your best

Maximisation of the students’ abilities was one of the strongest ideas about achievement that emerged from the data collected from this group of parents. This theme of ‘doing your best,’ of maximisation, aligned with the pattern that came through in the data from the student group. Parents believed that achievement meant that the student had to have worked to the best of his or her ability. Doing your best

meant doing the best that each particular student was capable of, in whatever area a task may be set.

I sort of say, look, achievement and high achievement is, you know, the best of your ability and you strive to do your best, you know, that's the most important thing, whether it's in a test you get 70 or 80 or 60 – if you have strived to do your best, then that person, that's their achievement.
(Rambo's parent)

There was a feeling of responsibility among several of these participants that it was their parental role to ensure that their own children were working to the best of their ability during their school years.

I always say to my children that all I want them to do is achieve to the best of their ability.
(Mr Bubbles' parent)

Encapsulated in this belief was an implicit but not overtly stated understanding that their children did have high ability and that the “best of their ability” could be seen to be at a different level from that of other students. Thus expectations of achievement for these students were frequently high. At the same time they did not want to be seen as ‘pushing’ their own child to achieve unrealistic goals. Some were aware of the negative connotations around ‘pushy parents,’ that seem often to be associated with parents of gifted and talented children. This notion is discussed further in the next chapter.

Um, what I have always said to Bruce Wayne is if at the end of the day you can say to yourself, I did my very best and I achieved to the best of my ability, then I am happy. I don't need him to be getting 100 out of 100 every time for me to be happy and for him to be happy.
(Bruce Wayne's parent)

I mean we have high expectations of them to do their best with their ability basically. But you know we don't sort of say, well, because you didn't get 10 out of 10 on his algebra test he's not achieving to the best of his ability.
(Rambo's parent)

The term 'best of your ability' was frequently used by parents when talking about their understandings of the phenomenon of achievement, but just as frequently, and meaning a similar thing, was the phrase 'reach your potential.' Many parents related the concept of achievement to 'reaching your potential.' They likened doing the best you can to fulfilling your potential, and these two phrases formed the most common descriptions of how the parent group described achievement.

Reach their potential would be my answer. I think everybody can achieve. I think it's about setting realistic goals and meeting them. I – at realistic, at your potential, I think, yeah, that's my achievement.
(Hubert Cumberland's parent)

Nearly all the parents talked about achievement as a maximisation of a student's abilities. They felt that, particularly as parents of highly able students, they should encourage this but tempered this by distancing themselves from a 'pushy parent' label, a label which they clearly felt uncomfortable about.

Putting in the effort

For several of the parents, understandings about achievement were intrinsically linked with effort. Parents felt that 'true' achievement could only be gained if there was effort involved. Responses indicated that some kind of struggle and persistence was necessary for achievement.

Mastering something that has required effort, and sort of was out there and has taken effort to get there.
(April's parent)

So a high achiever to me is someone who works really hard and is always pushing themselves to do better and better.
(Astrid's parent)

Astrid's parent linked effort with the maximisation of one's abilities. In her view, both were needed. This overlapping of the two themes represented a common belief for this group of parents. There was a realisation from these parents that for many of their own children, succeeding at school had come easily and they didn't equate this with 'true' achievement for their children. One parent used the example of her child winning the school cross country and being acknowledged by the school for this

achievement, but as she felt there was really no competition for her child in the school she didn't see this win as a particularly significant achievement. The child had not had to put in much effort in order to win. The parent felt that achieving too easily would not help a highly able student in future and that "it is hard when you meet these kids that are naturally able" (Hubert Cumberland's parent). She thought that these "naturally able kids" should be presented with greater challenges in order to understand that persistence and achievement were linked, as this understanding would be valuable for gifted students in their future endeavours.

Another talked about the experiences of both her highly able children as they went through primary school:

... you know, it was pretty easy for them to achieve but each of them gets to a point where at some point effort has to go in, where they start to have a dream of something that they are going to work towards, that is, and does require effort. And that's when you see achievement.
(April's parent)

She feels her University-aged son does now appreciate the difference.

You know he'll probably get an 'A' in his law papers. He still worked hard but if he gets a 'B' in his French, that would have been super-achievement because it really took a lot of effort.
(April's parent)

Several were at pains to report that they, as parents, wanted to ensure that their child knew that there was a relationship between effort and achievement. They believed that it was their responsibility, as the parent, to teach their children that, in their view, achievement gained through effort was more valued than achievement that relied solely on natural ability and required little or no effort on the part of the individual. This reflected social norms that these parents seemed to understand and share, whereby effort and hard work are respected as traits in individuals.

Being well-rounded

In addition to the prizing of traits of hard work and effort, it was very clear that these parents believed that all round achievement was the most valued in a New Zealand

cultural context. While acknowledging that to do well at school academically or to gain high marks in exams was esteemed, particularly at the secondary level, they wanted their children to learn that achievement was also about being a ‘good citizen,’ about being able to contribute to relationships and to society and to be able to follow talents that may not be related to academic pursuits. There was a widespread view that achievement was about being “well-rounded” or “all-round” and these terms were repeated frequently in the interviews with the parents.

For Kurt to achieve at high school then I’d say he, my idea is that he’s well-rounded. He plays his sport, he’s into his music, yes, he does well at school and his circle of friends are a nice bunch of boys.

(Kurt’s parent)

A high achiever I would think would be a good sort of all-round person.

(Rambo’s parent)

Although they recognised the importance of academic success as part of the well-roundedness, for these parents achievement was about more than just academic results.

And it’s not just academic either; it’s social and emotional areas, getting on with people, relationships ... all sorts of areas.

(April’s parent)

Yeah, there’s more to life, I think, than just receiving high marks when you sit a test.

(Kurt’s parent)

Aligned with this understanding that achievement was about being well-rounded, every parent interviewed expressed the belief that a sense of well-being is linked with achievement. The parents seemed to define this well-being in terms of social constructs and emotional states. Achievement and happiness were linked. Happiness came from an ability to relate to people and to ‘fit in’ socially and emotionally. The concept of ‘fitting in’ is an important theme that arose from the data from this study and this is developed further in the next chapter. Parents held the belief that life would be smoother for their child if they could develop positive feelings of well-being.

Well, it needs to be the whole person, doesn't it? Because I think, you know, um, achievement has to be tied up with being happy too and trying to have a whole life.
(Lewis' parent)

A few parents talked about the importance of "balance."

You have to still have the balance, really. We all want them to achieve and be – but we want them to be happy more.
(Autumn Ashes' parent)

Some parents seemed uncomfortable with the view that achievement was solely about attaining good grades and were keen to emphasise that this was not what they necessarily wanted for their able child. In this, they can be understood and seen to reflect the socio-cultural expectations of New Zealand society, which values all-round achievement over purely academic achievement. There was a genuine wish for their child to attain this balance and sense of well-being, which seemed to include being a good citizen and being happy, but they also understood that high academic success could be part of this achievement equation.

Achievement as related to NCEA assessment

There was some interesting divergence in the initial responses of two of the parents to the questions about what they saw as achievement. This was very much related to the New Zealand context in that they interpreted the phenomenon of achievement in terms of the NCEA vernacular.² In NCEA, 'Achievement' is a term used to indicate a particular level of performance in the New Zealand examination system. An 'Achievement' grade is a level that these parents believed was below the capabilities of their able children. In this context, 'Achievement' would not be seen as being at the top end.

Well, see, achieve was a different word until we got to NCEA and now we get this blasted 'Achievement.' So the word 'achievement' for me now means it's OK.
(Oliver Stone's parent)

² NCEA (National Certificate of Educational Achievement) is the examination system used in New Zealand secondary schools. Assessment is based around three levels: Achievement, Merit or Excellence.

This parent expressed frustration with the assessment levels used in the NCEA system and focused on how this had changed the meaning of achievement for her. She felt that ‘achievement’ used to indicate an impressive result but now it was just about a pass, “it’s 50% in my book.”

The parents’ views of achievement were about working to the best of one’s ability, but also about putting in an effort as well as using that ability. Parents understood that it was their responsibility as parents to make sure that their able students understood that effort was needed to achieve but at the same time they did not want to be targeted as ‘pushy parents.’ They also believed that achievement was about attaining a balance in life, which meant a healthy well-being. Being an all-round achiever was most valued but this did include academic success. Their views could be seen to be echoing shared social values and New Zealand cultural expectations. These understandings are explored in more depth in Chapters Five and Six.

Understandings from the teachers

The responses from the teachers reflected a mix of personal views and views that may have been influenced by their own school’s culture of achievement as understood by each of the teachers. They reflected carefully while giving their responses and most were very interested in discussing the phenomenon with the researcher and became engaged in a conceptual way.

Understandings about achievement for the teachers are categorised under the following meaning units: performance and results, the relationship between natural ability and effort, an inner motivation and more than just results. Again, there is considerable cross-over between the themes listed here; some of the teachers included interrelated concepts in their deliberations.

Performance and results

The teachers’ understandings were predominantly constructed around a performance view: the belief that achievement needed to be about performance. All the teachers interviewed talked about the need to produce the work that had been set, preferably to a high standard. Achievement was about the results a student produced. It was

understood that school managers expected that achievement be measured by some form of assessment.

I think probably what achievement means is to some extent based on what they produce on paper, um because that's very definite and we can make a judgement about that and we have marking criteria.
(Teacher of Mr Bubbles)

But because of the system we have, in the end we are still assessing on examination which gives them a grade, that's a major focus, or it's our major measure.
(Teacher of Marty)

The influence of a school culture that focused on achievement in terms of results is demonstrated by this teacher's comment made after a group of students had won an international competition. The teacher remarked to the Principal about the growth in the team work demonstrated by the group, something the teacher saw as an achievement in itself.

And the Principal said, 'yes, but the greatest achievement was winning.'
(Intermediate teacher 1)

Some teachers quantified what they understood to be high achievement.

I guess it's excelling in an area. Um, it would be in the top 5% I think is really high achievement.
(Teacher of Autumn Ashes)

Teachers used terms such as "excelling," "excellent grades," "academic excellence," and "getting the school prizes."

One of the intermediate teachers felt that being able to manage one's time correlated with producing the results and he related this to his understanding of what achievement meant.

They just, in simple terms, they were managing their time. They were getting the tasks done. They were producing what you would expect and beyond what you would expect.
(Intermediate Teacher 1)

Developing a good attitude and good work habits were central to his understanding about achievement, with sound organisation understood to support students to excel and achieve high results.

Relationship between natural ability and effort

Teachers spoke about the connection between natural ability and effort in relation to achievement. Some felt that achievement meant that both these attributes needed to be present.

The amount of gift that you've got or the natural ability plus the amount of work you put in.
(Teacher of Kurt)

... hard worker, but using, but achieves extremely well because it's combined with gifted, the fact that they're gifted but they're also a hard worker.
(Intermediate Teacher 2)

Teachers explored this relationship in the same vein as the students and parents, thus reflecting similar values, with many teachers stressing that effort was just as important as ability for achievement. They talked about the “hard work” making the difference and two teachers felt that there could be a ceiling effect for highly able students if they did not learn to put in the effort. They believed that a student could achieve on natural ability early on in their schooling, but that high school meant learning “some quite deep stuff.” One even went so far as to comment that:

... by the time they get to Year 9 that natural talent stuff is starting to run out.
(Teacher of Astrid)

Other teachers stated that one or the other of these attributes was more important for achievement.

You can be a high achiever but not necessarily that brilliant, but you just work really hard and learn everything.
(Teacher of Autumn Ashes)

And conversely:

Maybe they didn't have to work particularly hard but they've got some sort of natural ability, then they still have achieved at a high level regardless.
(Teacher of April)

These teachers were making the clear distinction between achievement being more about effort and achievement being more about an innate ability, indicating a relationship, but in which one premise was stronger than the other. The teachers saw that one or other of effort or natural ability may play the greater part in achievement for any particular individual or context, but that achievement will still always relate to both factors.

An inner motivation

Some of the teachers referred to the concept of inner motivation when they talked about high achievement. Achievement was about having the "intrinsic motivation" (Intermediate Teacher 2) to do well, coupled with knowing what was required in order to succeed in tasks, such as being focused or asking questions. Teachers saw the motivational forces as being within the control of the student. This attitude that led students to strive to produce the work required was an important indicator of achievement.

... because they've got this inner desire to do the best that they can do.
(Intermediate Teacher 2)

Because they, you know, they are self-motivated, they understand some of the things which enable them to learn well.
(Teacher of Mr Bubbles)

The teachers' reflections about achievement invariably linked this inner motivation with other themes, such as the previous themes of effort and producing the results. Achievement was about results, but it was the inner desire to achieve that enabled a student to reach those goals.

So my achieving student would be actually one ... with the inquisitive, the thirst and the desire and motivation who then actually comes forward and produces the work close to their standard. That's the

achiever in my mind.
(Teacher of Marty)

Teachers did see that achievement was reached through effort but for some teachers it was more than this; it was the desire to persist, coming from within the student, that was the leading factor.

More than just test results

Because the overriding number of responses from the teachers referred to achievement as being about performance and results in school assessment structures, the contrasting idea that it should not be about just what is produced in tests presents an interesting variance. Three of the teachers, from three different schools, reflected on this conundrum as they wrestled with their thoughts on achievement. These teachers understood that achievement was about producing the work required to a high standard but they were uncomfortable about this expectation from schools and the wider education 'system.' As Mr Bubbles' teacher put it, "we're quite narrow in our focus of how we recognise achievement."

April's teacher was concerned that test results were not always the best indicators of a student's ability.

I do have a little bit of a problem with some of the tests I have to say because, like I said, April didn't get a High Distinction or a Distinction, whereas I see the work in front of me and I think, oh goodness, she's clearly an exceptional girl.
(Teacher of April)

These teachers felt that there were other forms of achievement that were not measured by results, reflecting a broader understanding of achievement than one based on a measurement of some kind.

Some of the more informal things, like we mentioned those perceptive comments. I mean I'm saying maybe it should be more important but I think in reality they're not as important as maybe they should be.
(Teacher of Mr Bubbles)

He does so well in so many different things and he does well in things that are not necessarily graded or marked, like the Drama or being on that Environment Committee.
(Teacher of Lewis)

At the same time, it was acknowledged that this was not the way things worked in New Zealand schools, or rather the way these teachers understood the focus to be within their institutional structure. The influence of the school culture under which they themselves worked was a factor in teachers' views on achievement, but these teachers clearly thought there was room for change in some of the ways achievement was usually judged in schools. The teacher of Mr Bubbles implied that he personally had differing views from those of his school but he was also well aware of the restrictions under which he worked. Exams and results were valued by the school as indicators of achievement but he talked about his own view, which was that achievement was about more than just results.

So I'm trying to give you an honest answer here rather than just an official [school name] answer.
(Teacher of Mr Bubbles)

The teacher of both Oliver Stone and Bruce Wayne had a unique understanding about what achievement was. He believed that achievement was first and foremost about having strong life values and linked this to future success in a wider society. His ideas reflected a broader understanding of achievement beyond school-based academic achievement. He did not mention achievement in terms of academic success or producing results until quite some time into the discussion, but spoke at length about the need to relate achievement to "having really, really good values." He felt that the values needed to help boys "integrate into society well" were important. He listed attributes such as having sound social skills, budgeting skills, the ability to hold a conversation and look after one's health and well-being as being essential for achievement in the real world.

A high achiever to me is someone that has good values, good life values ... Having good key values are really, really important for success in the big wide world out there.
(Teacher of Oliver Stone and Bruce Wayne)

This teacher's ideas aligned with those of some of the parents who felt that achievement was about being well-rounded, about students developing into good citizens of the world. He mentioned the work of Celia Lashlie, a New Zealand author and advocate who wrote about raising boys to become worthy citizens in society, which had clearly struck a chord with him.

And that's sort of for me, if you look at some of the stuff that, say, Celia Lashlie's done, the Fine Young man stuff, or Good Men stuff, they're coming out, they've got good values, good life values and good values about society.

Chapter Six expands on the participants' views around achievement being about the development of social capital as well as individual success.

One other teacher also expressed a wider, more socially-focused view of achievement, but this view overlapped with his belief that achievement was still strongly about the quality of work that the boys (in this case) produced.

Um, the high achiever I still see the person ... who's that thinker, who's going, making the link to the real world today ... And then, as I said, I think it's the quality they can produce.
(Teacher of Marty)

This teacher's responses were particularly interesting in that, in his musings about what achievement might be, he independently referred to all of the themes outlined under this section on the teachers' understandings.

For these teachers, achievement meant that there was a clear measurement in terms of school-based assessment results or performance, to provide evidence that achievement had occurred. They understood that achievement was about both natural ability and effort but had differing views about the relative importance of these two attributes, in explaining achievement. Several teachers focused on achievement as being about the motivation that came from within the student. In contrast to achievement being solely about results or performance, some teachers held more of a view related to social responsibility. For them achievement was to do with being a good citizen or possessing strong life values. While recognising the institutional pressure of

‘performance’ as achievement, some teachers were challenging what they saw as a limited view of achievement based around a specific schooling assessment structure.

What is underachievement?

Understandings from the students

The students were aware that underachievement could mean different things to different people. Most found it easier to use concrete examples related to their own experiences or their observations of their peers, to help them to construct some meaning that made sense for them. These understandings from the students are described in terms of four major meaning units that have been derived from the responses; underachievement is about not working to your ability, about your own expectations, about a lack of effort and about low interest in school-related tasks, coupled with the prioritising of a social life. It is recognised that some of these meaning units offer the counter-point to the ideas expressed about what constitutes achievement, but the findings explored also offer an explication of new insights into what it means to underachieve according to the participants. As with the section on achievement, several responses show that the themes are often linked together in students’ constructions of the meaning of underachievement.

Not working to your ability

While students had spoken about the idea of maximising your ability to explain what achievement meant to them, the opposite was true for understandings about underachievement. Working at a level that was less than that which a student was capable of was to underachieve.

Underachieved in that I haven’t done as well as I could have done.
Like I haven’t necessarily failed something, but I just haven’t done as well as I could have done.
(Autumn Ashes)

It was not about failing a test or a course, but about getting low grades when a particular student could obviously have done much better. Some students identified a ‘pass’ mark as underachievement. This was related to an assertion that for highly able

students a pass or a low grade was not working to your ability because a high grade could reasonably be expected. Reference was made to the NCEA exam system – an ‘Achieved’ assessment was seen as merely a pass and not good enough for highly able students.

They could just cruise through high school, just getting grades that are just enough to pass, they don’t mind, you know?
(Hubert Cumberland)

Um well, ‘Achieveds’ aren’t particularly, you know, they’re not particularly hard to get or anything so it is quite a low mark so it probably would be [underachievement] yes.
(Marty)

A few mentioned that they had “only” got an ‘Achieved’ or had “just passed” in their reflection sheets when answering the question about things that had not worked well for them that month.

Several of the students used the term ‘potential’ interchangeably with ‘ability.’ If a highly able student was not performing to his or her perceived potential, then this counted as underachieving in their view. They used the term ‘potential’ without seeing a real need to dissect its meaning.

Maybe underachieving is just like not really living up to your full potential kind of.
(Astrid)

Because they’re achieving under what they could have achieved so yes. Or what they had the potential to achieve.
(Marty)

Kurt was scathing about able students who did not set themselves realistically high goals which matched their potential and thus were not working to their ability. He saw this as underachievement, especially because such a student might not even reach the low goal that had been set.

Ah, someone who basically decides to put the bar somewhere which is maybe stupidly low for them and where they should have the bar, maybe if it’s only half or quarter of that and then if they only just

reach that or don't reach it and it's basically about not committing themselves to trying to get to where they can and their potential levels.

These students constructed their understandings based on their own experiences as learners with high ability. Thus, they seemed to assume standards of underachievement that were different for them than might be applied for other learners. A pass mark, an average grade or a poor report were the standards used to explain "not working to your ability" for these students. The experience of being a high achiever and the resulting high expectations that these particular students held for themselves are discussed in greater depth in Chapter Five.

About your own expectations

Nearly all of the students expressed individualistic views of underachievement. They saw themselves as the arbitrators of what underachievement was about. Ideas about underachievement were consistent with the students' views about achievement. For the students it wasn't about what others, such as teachers and parents, thought. There were examples told of when a student thought he or she had underachieved but a teacher may have been satisfied with the result, as in the case in this conversation with Rambo below:

I just got in the Merit mark and I usually get high Merit or Excellence, so I thought, you know, I could have done better. So I thought myself I had underachieved my ability.

Would the teacher say you'd underachieved?

No, cos within the class the Merit is – it goes Not Achieved, Achieved, Merit, Excellence, so that's a high pass, but for myself I would see it as an underachievement.

The failure to reach their own expectations was sometimes talked about in terms of marks or class rankings which appeared to be important to some students, but not to all.

Yes, I can underachieve. It's, well, getting under my goal. If I achieve 12th or 11th in the end of year exam then that would not be my goal

and I would count that as underachieving.
(Bruce Wayne)

I felt a bit silly as some of my friends got 100% and I hate it when my friends get higher marks than me.
(April, Reflection Sheet)

April was concerned with keeping up the high standards that she had set herself but which were also measured by comparison with others. It was her own expectations that were her goal but she also assessed her performance and achievement in relation to her highly able peers. She expected to do as well or better than her peers and not to do so was seen by her as a form of underachievement. There seemed to be a complex link between the students' ideas about underachievement relating to their own expectations and to measurement against others. If, as some of the students like April admitted, they were comparing themselves against others, is this solely because of their own expectations or could it reflect social expectations to which students feel they should conform? The message from a broader values system might be that being gifted and talented means that they should be performing at a higher level than other students and this may be reflected in their own expectations.

For most of the students, the belief that underachievement was about the way they themselves felt was often linked to the previous theme, in that they were disappointed that they had not performed to the best of their ability. These students knew in their own minds that they had not achieved as highly as they could have done and that they had the ability to do better.

When you're disappointed in yourself, like when you know you haven't done as well as you could, that's, I guess, underachieving for you.
(Autumn Ashes)

Others accepted that they had not achieved and reiterated that "you know better than anyone else," but they also maintained, like Lewis, that sometimes "I don't care what others think." This reinforced the idea that for these students it was about their own self judgement and their own standards and personal aspirations.

As well as their understanding that underachievement was related to their own expectations it was interesting that most of this group of highly able students admitted that the failure to reach their expectations rested either wholly or in part with their own efforts, or rather, lack thereof. Thus, these two themes of being about one's own expectations and a lack of effort also overlapped in their construction of the phenomenon.

Lack of effort

The students again made mention of the relationship between effort and achievement. However, for their understandings about underachievement it was the relationship between a lack of effort and a low performance. Students talked in colloquial terms when trying to explain a lack of effort such as “not being bothered,” being “lazy,” or “cruising.” Most saw that if one chose not to put in the effort, such as studying or taking notes in class, one would inevitably not achieve highly.

I think it's maybe like if you know how much you can do and you just, like, can't be bothered, and you're just like, ' Oh, it'll be fine if I just go this far' when you really could have gone further. And lazy, only doing like enough to get you passed and not much more.

(Astrid)

But you can just not take on board anything they say and you can not study for the exam. So you usually get the mark you deserve ...

(Oliver Stone)

Although these students nearly all admitted that they themselves were usually disappointed with any lack of effort on their part that led to low marks, it was understood that some of their contemporaries could be seen to be unconcerned about any kind of underachievement.

If you're not really trying in class or in school for anything and you don't really care what mark you get or how well you do.

(Marty)

They could just cruise through high school just getting grades that are just enough to pass, they don't mind ...

(Hubert Cumberdale)

Particular mention was made of able students who were obviously not trying as hard as they should and resting on their laurels by achieving to a certain level with very little effort. They saw these students as underachieving and that it was the lack of effort that led to this, as it was apparent that high achievement could certainly be attained by these students with ability.

It's really annoying to see people that you know are smart just not even trying because it kind of defeats the purpose of going to school. Like if you're gonna go to school, you might as well try.
(Bruce Wayne)

Like they do better than average but compared to everyone else who's improving, like, they're sitting on their 'A' class stamp almost and they're like, 'Oh I'm in the A class, I'm smart, I don't need to worry about this.'
(Rambo)

Several had specific examples of peers in their class or at their school who they knew were highly able but who had chosen to coast along rather than try their hardest at school-related tasks. As in the context of the students' perceptions about achievement, the majority view was that even if a pass mark or a "better than average" mark was attained, this was not really achievement for highly able students if no effort had been applied. Rather, any grade that was reached without effort was seen as underachieving.

Low interest

There were numerous comments from the students linking underachievement to low interest in school-related activities. Low interest was expressed in terms of being bored with what was being taught. As well, several talked about "not caring" if they were not doing well.

Maybe I've lost interest in the subject or it's really, really boring, um or if a teacher's not very helpful at all, it makes you think, oh do I really care?
(Rambo)

They don't really care that they're not doing so well. They might get bored more often.
(Oliver Stone)

For these highly able students, work that did not seem to have a purpose led to low motivation to achieve in that area. The students were adamant in their expressed belief that any learning should prepare them for the future; there should be some relevance to the subjects being taught. If they themselves deemed this not to be the case then underachievement might result. Authentic learning should be the goal.

... rather than learning something that we'll probably never use in our lives and we don't even know why we're learning.
(Oliver Stone)

The students were making personal judgements about what they saw as worth achieving, which can be seen as informing their understandings about the concept of underachievement as well. In this context, the students talked about the importance of exams, which to them "counted for something." Learning that enabled them to do well in exams was seen as vital because achievement in exams helped prepare them for their future. Some did not see the point of learning that wasn't aimed at exams.

Well this year it kind of doesn't matter as much to me as like next year, obviously NCEA and stuff. So I will admit I've been kind of lazy this year.
(Autumn Ashes)

Having to continue with school and work after exams isn't really needed. Just boring waste of time.
(Kurt, Reflection Sheet)

The judgement was that school-related tasks that did not lead towards exam success were pointless and there was less impetus to achieve in these areas. The students showed an acceptance of exams as a valid representation of 'success.' They were willing to play the 'game' and saw exams as a ticket for the future, operating within a system that measures success by exams, but they were intolerant of school-related work that did not fit in with this context and made their own choices about achieving or underachieving. It is understood that the students' views are embedded within a social context.

Prioritising of a social life

Interest in some aspects of schooling was frequently low because one's social life was uppermost in the minds of students. Many in this participant group believed that underachievement in school was about an overriding focus on negotiating one's place in the social world, to the detriment of the kind of school success that may be expected from highly able learners. When asked to talk about their understandings of underachievement, the majority of students referred at some time to the influence of issues around an adolescent social life. They felt that not doing as well at school as they were capable of could be because things outside of academic learning were more important to young people.

Cos yeah, my social life is probably the most important part of my life.
(Hubert Cumberland)

Here was the conundrum for them: did they focus on 'fitting in' to a social group that took up all their energy and thus risk underachieving in academic matters, or did they focus on achieving highly which might come at the expense of finding the social fit they desired?

Some of the students related examples of behaviours from their peers that they felt illustrated their understandings.

There's kids that could be doing better but they sit at the back of the class and have a laugh with their mates and that takes priority over their work and that's probably the biggest factor I have seen in class myself, for underachieving.
(Rambo)

Yeah, and it's also like the people who underachieve generally are the people who have a higher social life.
(April)

Hubert Cumberland disagreed with April's comment which was made during a focus group interview. She didn't think that "having a real big social life makes you an underachiever." She, along with others, admitted that for highly able students there was a choice but that it was up to the individual student to manage his or her social life and to realise that doing well at school was important as well. She felt that

underachievement was more about giving in to the demands of a social life, that then meant you didn't perform to the best of your ability. Underachievement was not so much about having a social life, but more about the decisions one made to work or not to work towards school success. Bruce Wayne, during the same interview, agreed.

But maybe, maybe your social side, like, means more to you. You know, so you've sort of gotta think about what you want. You know, if you don't really care about getting bad grades or whatever, you're working on, like, making friends and going to parties and things, that's fine, keep going on with your parties and, you know, so you've just sort of gotta think about what matters most to you and what's the most important at that stage of your life.
(Bruce Wayne)

It was the prioritising of a social life above all else to the extent that low interest in other matters, including academic work, that was understood to constitute or contribute to underachievement. Bruce Wayne also understood that underachievement could be about having "negative" influences from one's social life, which did not encourage a student towards high achievement.

But you guys, like, have a positive social life. Like some people have a really negative social life. They might have a really negative group of friends and that's sometimes why they would underachieve because like they wanna be with their group of friends and feel stable and like it's not always the reason but sometimes it is. And I can think of examples of where that's happened a bit.

The tension between negotiating a successful adolescent social life and continuing to perform highly in the school situation could lead to underachieving behaviours, according to these students. For some, underachievement may be the price to pay for social acceptance among one's peers. Even a one-off situation, such as Astrid describes, could affect their learning.

My two best friends had a major falling out and they weren't talking to each other ... I was worrying about it quite a bit, especially during maths – oops – and ended up accidentally missing out on learning some stuff in maths.
(Astrid, Reflection Sheet)

All of these young people were aware of their abilities and talked about wanting to do well, but they were not immune to the difficulties all adolescents face when dealing with their relationships with friends. The students understood that, for many able adolescents, underachievement could be about low interest in the academic task required of them and that this was frequently compounded by a focus on negotiating their social identities. The dilemmas that gifted and talented students often face around adolescent identity issues is explored more fully in both Chapter Six and Chapter Seven of this thesis.

Challenging the idea of underachievement

Two of the students expressed discomfort at the term “underachievement” and were reluctant to formulate any kind of definition. Hubert Cumberland wasn’t sure that there was such a thing as an underachiever at all.

And I don’t think anyone is an underachiever. So you know you can’t really be an underachiever ... everyone’s goals are at a different scale. And they might have goals in odd things that didn’t matter as much to other people. Their goal could have been to have a healthy family or you know, like have lots of friends and, you know, to make other people feel good about themselves. So it’s not just the things that lots of people think that, you know, those three things: music, academic and sports, they’re the things that you can only achieve in ...”

She tried to express her belief that those who may be seen as underachievers by some may well be achieving highly in areas of importance to them, and that in that respect, the phenomenon of underachievement couldn’t exist as everyone achieved in something.

Kurt, too, played down the importance of such a phenomenon. He saw it as fleeting; it was something that one could change and was a normal consequence of differing life events.

I don’t really think it’s that important to worry about if you get, if you’re down, not achieving as highly as you could for a couple of things for a little while, because it could just be there’s different events happening in your life, whatever, and naturally that will affect what you do. And normally it doesn’t last too long, so you should be able to just dig through it and get back on track. And normally you’d

be able to sort your life out in time to be able to do – like when it comes to an important exam or test or something, normally you're able to get yourself organised to do it ... No-one's perfect and just what's happening in their life and around them affects what they do and how well they do sometimes.

Although he, in effect, defined underachievement as “not achieving as highly as you could,” he normalised the phenomenon as something everyone experienced from time to time, which was a different view from those who expressed frustration with students who were underachieving. This illustrates the variation that existed within the students' views about underachievement.

Most of the students were united in the understanding that underachievement was about not working to one's ability, not achieving to the standard that they knew they could, which several termed their 'potential.' Underachievement was not necessarily about failing a test, but was more to do with performing at a level that was less than could be expected from a student of high ability. In common with their views about achievement, their understandings about underachievement are a complex mixture of ideas including that it is about the expectations that they set themselves and about a lack of effort, about cruising or relying on ability alone, which meant one would not reach one's potential. Several students understood that underachievement was about having different priorities in life and in particular this meant focusing on an adolescent social life. A lack of interest in school subjects, or believing that there was no purpose in the learning, was also associated with underachievement for these students. Overall, it was clear that tensions existed for these adolescents, between expectations of achievement in school performance, both from themselves and others, and their own needs around adolescent identity development.

Understandings from the parents.

Parents tried to articulate an overall conceptual understanding of underachievement in relation to achievement. However, many found it easier to talk about the specific behaviours that indicated underachievement and to refer to their own children, often providing examples of times when they believed their child was underachieving. Bringing in their own child's experiences helped the parents develop their thoughts. Three major meaning units relating to underachievement emerged from the inter-

participant analysis of responses, but again there were times when parents combined themes as they constructed their opinions and attempted to express these verbally. The themes explored in this section are: not working to your ability, an acceptance of mediocrity, and lacking interest.

Not working to your ability

Parents' responses about underachievement were in line with students' responses, in that the idea of not maximising the ability that one was given was a strong premise in the data from both. Students were understood to be underachieving if the work they produced was at a lower level than their obvious capabilities, parents believed.

When you don't do your best, when you don't achieve to, at the level you can.

(Bruce Wayne's parent)

Wasting, wasting your abilities ...

(Lewis' parent)

Several referred to the notion of 'not meeting your potential,' the antithesis of beliefs about achievement which, for many, was about 'reaching your potential.' Parents were strongly of the view that those students who had exceptional ability were demonstrating underachievement if they did not perform to this perceived 'potential.' Hubert Cumberland's parent seemed quite exasperated by this inability of highly able students to perform to the high standard of which they were deemed capable, as she expresses in the quote below.

When you've got kids that you know can do stuff and you know that they're talented, you know that they should continue with the piano or running or that if they just tried a little bit they would do so much better, and I think that's not achievement and I think that would be a huge frustration for parents – and parents of able kids – is when they're not meeting their potential in whatever field it is.

April's parent was expressing a majority view from the parents when she stated that "well, we can talk in big terms, these are our future leaders and everything and they, we just as a country need them to be successful." Most parents seemed to believe that gifted and talented students were the ones who could be important contributors to

society as a whole if they did reach their potential. Thus, it was even more frustrating if these talented young people did not follow an achieving pathway. Similarly, Autumn Ashes' parent thought that "our top kids are the ones that are going to go off-shore and do these things, you know" explaining that she felt they had the potential to perform to a change-making level, and to not reach some of that potential was underachievement in her view.

Lewis' parent was also adamant that underachievement was to do with failure to reach one's potential and appeared to echo this frustration.

It's not fulfilling your potential and just coasting along, wherever you have, you know, have potential, not fulfilling it. Um, and you know if you've got a good brain, just sort of coasting along and not really using it ... it doesn't mean you've got to turn into an Olympian or something extreme, but just sort of, you know, doddling along, I suppose, and not really fulfilling your potential.

However there was a conundrum for the parents who were aware that they could not accurately predict what their child's potential might be and this concerned some parents. For example, Mr Bubbles' parent muses:

I don't know if they've achieved to the best of their potential or not. I don't know, gosh. [laughter] Why don't I know?

If they wanted their child to maximise his or her potential but they didn't know what that might be, then some were confused as to whether there was underachievement happening or not. Issues around the notion of reaching one's potential are revisited in Chapter Six.

Other parents felt that they would recognise if their own child was not working to his or her ability. This view was extended to all parents and children by some of the participants' parents, who believed that both parents and teachers knew when a student was not maximising abilities, because high ability had been demonstrated previously. It was underachievement if a student had performed to a high level in a particular area in the past but was now working at a much lower level.

I guess if he wasn't getting all 'As' and if he was not getting Excellences, that would, you know, Marty would be underachieving

then ... because he has done [well] and because he finds it easy to do
and he always does.
(Marty's parent)

Well, you know if they're not getting 90% or whatever, then they're
underachieving, perhaps, I don't know, of what they're capable of.
(Oliver Stone's parent)

There was a more clearly expressed view from these parents that a highly able student who was not doing his or her best was more concerning for all involved than perhaps it might be for students who were not as talented, but were also not performing to the best of their ability. Highly able students were seen by the parents as having some kind of responsibility to perform highly and to avoid wasting the talent that they possessed. A number of parents mentioned some form of grade when defining this high performance that was expected. This concept links to the next category, in which a low grade might be accepted by the students and this represents underachievement in the eyes of many parents.

Acceptance of mediocrity and lack of effort

Several parents indicated that their understanding of underachievement was about an acceptance of mediocrity from the students themselves. Again this 'dumbing down' by the highly able students seemed to be especially frustrating for parents as they were aware of the natural ability that these students possessed. Students had the ability to achieve at the highest levels but were choosing, for whatever reason, to be satisfied with lower standards rather than rise to challenges. Some parents thought that an average or 'good enough' result was accepted by their children and other students.

She slid for the last three or four years there so badly ... She was just
in the mire of mediocrity.
(Autumn Ashes' parent)

Um, if you are happy with minimal work, the lowest level that is
acceptable ...
(Bruce Wayne's parent)

Parents used colloquial terms such as "cruising," "doddlng along," or "coasting" to try to explain how they saw the continued practice of mediocre performances. They

reported incidents of highly able students just passing a test rather than achieving the top results of which they were capable.

And I would say underachievement is when you don't even try and you haven't – you know, if you just say, 'well, I'm gonna pass everything' and you should be aiming for Excellences [as in NCEA rankings], I think that's underachievement because you aren't even trying to achieve. That's just cruising.
(Hubert Cumberland's parent)

Astrid's parent accepted that her daughter was achieving the required standard in her favourite subject, but knew that this was an average performance compared to past results. She seemed to be opting for a mediocre level of achievement in a subject area where she had previously wanted to do her best. The enthusiasm for the subject had dissipated.

She was still achieving and passing and doing OK in English, but she just wasn't as involved or as excited as she had been.

Underachievement as an average performance was linked to a lack of effort in some parents' views. Mediocrity occurred because the student was not trying, not putting in the effort (as Hubert Cumberland's parent alluded to in the quote above) and so not reaching the heights that others expected of them. There was an overlap between low effort and not maximising one's ability.

Because they haven't put the effort in and done it to the level they can do.
(Kurt's parent)

Parents talked about students “not being bothered” to achieve highly or “just doing what makes life easy,” representing an acceptance of mediocrity. One related this to goal setting in that even though a student might set realistic goals for her ability there was no effort to reach these and mediocre performances resulted. The belief that there was a relationship between a lack of effort and underachievement is consistent with the responses about achievement, which indicated the belief that there was a relationship between achievement and effort.

These parents did not talk about underachievement in terms of failure to pass or failure to reach an average standard. The acceptance of mediocrity was just that – a mediocre performance when much more could realistically be expected from these highly able students, reflecting the high expectations that the parents set for the students.

Lack of interest

The belief that underachievement was about a lack of interest was a common thread from the parents' responses. The lack of interest theme is connected to acceptance of mediocrity and to not putting in an effort. There could be low motivation from the students and unwillingness to accept challenges in school-related tasks.

It's just complete lack of interest, lack of motivation and you know just being miserable and discontent.
(Lewis' parent)

I feel like I know that he is underachieving, but I, but it's just also in the attitude, it's the motivation level.
(Oliver Stone's parent)

Boredom was alluded to frequently in relation to low interest and parents felt that underachievement occurred as a result. Responses indicated that parents believed this could be connected to the lack of a stimulating school environment. A few parents seemed to attribute the blame for the loss of interest to the curriculum or to teaching practices.

And if they get bored they'll slip away. They'll just get distracted and bored and lose interest. Um, yeah, high school's a funny thing. If they don't stimulate you, you'll get bored ...
(Kurt's parent)

And I think the kids that aren't achieving are because they're bored with what they're learning ... I think they're not challenged. I think that they're bored.
(Hubert Cumberland's parent)

One parent related the lack of interest to students not being able to see a purpose for the learning, showing an understanding of the students' views as reported previously.

If there didn't seem to be a reason for doing a particular task, then the student was even less interested in attempting it.

Because what's the point in doing something? I've heard Mr Bubbles say it before. I've heard him say: well, what's the point?
(Mr Bubbles' parent)

Some recognised that the lack of interest for school related tasks could be a result of competing interests for the students, particularly those to do with adolescent identity issues. Several parents felt that sometimes highly able students did not really care about their perceived underachievement at school.

They are not interested. That is not their driving force in life to get 7 out of 10; their interest is in a different area.
(Bruce Wayne's parent)

These parents understood that underachievement was associated with a lack of interest and low motivation for school tasks, based on their experiences with their own children and they also reported on their observations of their children's classmates. Parents saw this lack of enthusiasm as being a 'fault' of a school environment that did not challenge their highly able children. Many also understood that the students themselves were focused on outside interests and on adolescent development issues that were more pressing for them than achieving highly at school.

Parents believed underachievement for these highly able students to be when students were not performing to the level which could be expected from them. Some parents conveyed the frustration they felt when they perceived that highly able students were not doing their best and this kind of underachievement seemed to be of more concern than that which might be expected from a less able student. There was a discernable link between parents' ideas that students were accepting mediocre performances from themselves and concerns about a lack of interest in the kinds of school-related tasks that students were required to complete. According to the parents, these tasks often had little purpose or challenge attached to them in the eyes of their children. Although parents' views were not based on first-hand experiences of what was happening in classrooms, but rather on their observations of their children's interests, their

understandings are significant because they provide a retrospective view of student schooling experiences and thus help to bring the phenomenon to light.

Understandings from the teachers

This group of teachers expressed some common views about what underachievement meant to them but there was also a greater variety among the participants' beliefs than was the case for the students and the parents. Several teachers seemed to hold specific understandings that were based around one particular notion of what underachievement was, while others saw it as being about several differing themes. Teachers referred to specific students that they had taught, as cases to illustrate their points, based on their experience and observations or what could be termed their 'professional noticing.' These students were sometimes the participants from this study but more often than not teachers talked about "a boy I have in my class now" or "a girl I taught once."

All teachers shared the view, as expressed by Autumn Ashes' teacher, that "an underachiever can be really, really able" and were, in the main, confident that they could recognise underachievement in a highly able student.

Because I've seen it, and that's how you know. You see evidence of it and you know because you've done it there, you've done it there, but why are you not doing it here, here and here.
(Teacher of April)

The meaning units that were most common from the data emerging from this group were that underachievement is about not working to your ability, about low interest, a lack of skills and a lack of effort. However, in common with the views of two students, Hubert Cumberland and Kurt, two teachers also indicated that they were not sure about the term itself and the negative connotations that the label such as 'underachievement' might have for students.

Not working to your ability

The theme of not working to your ability was prevalent in the teachers' responses, as it was for the students and parents. There was agreement among the three participant groups that underachievement was about not working to the standard that could be

expected from these highly able students. As April's teacher said in the quote above, teachers knew what a student could do because they had seen evidence of ability previously and a student who was no longer performing at this high level was, in their view, underachieving. Kurt's teacher felt similarly:

Well, what it means to me is that the kid is not achieving at a level which they're actually capable of doing.
(Teacher of Kurt)

In describing the notion of not working to your ability, the teachers frequently interchanged the word 'potential' for 'ability,' in the same way as many of the students and parents had done. There was general agreement that students should always be supported to "reach their potential" and, if this was not happening, then this was underachievement.

Not working to potential, that's the key thing. It's a concern. It's a concern.
(Intermediate Teacher 2)

But they're not reaching their potential or they're not, um, yeah they're underachieving, they're not reaching what they can. Well, you see flashes of their potential, don't you, coming through all the time and then when they don't produce that, perhaps, consistently then to me they're not reaching their potential, that they're underachieving. And then that of course is reflected in their results.
(Teacher of April)

The enigma of what 'potential' might be seemed to be clearer for teachers than it was for the parents. Teachers referred to measurement by past test results of some kind to indicate the level at which a student could be expected to achieve. April's teacher, along with several others, reflected on underachievement in relation to the results that were being produced maintaining that this showed a student was not working to his or her ability. Under this performance view, measurement through test results or even book work that was produced was assumed to be a sound indicator for some. Performance, or rather lack of performance, was compared to information gained from previous assessments. Some mentioned IQ tests or Progressive Achievement

Test ³ results which indicated that a student was highly able and had potential.

Teachers then judged low performance against a high result from an assessment such as these, to confirm underachievement.

Um, you know, so they might come with a very, very high score at the start of Year nine, but then for whatever reasons when they come to Year 11 they've not sort of been working at that level and they come out with a with a negative, um, residual at the end of the year. So I suppose that that would be some – so it's not just on the teacher's hunch. You know, your feeling that somebody was not working particularly well, um, would actually have some kind of data to back it up.

(Teacher of Mr Bubbles)

Teachers understood that underachievement was not about failing or even low grades for these highly able students. They felt that many of these students were “just passing” on purpose, because they could achieve to a mediocre standard, without any effort by relying on their natural ability. This was in line with the views of the parents who saw underachievement as being about the acceptance of mediocrity in that a pass mark was good enough for some highly able students. Autumn Ashes' teacher was discussing an able student he was concerned about and when asked if this student still passed his subjects, his reply was, “Oh yes, always. Yeah, that's the underachiever isn't it? And that's the one, um, as a teacher you should be concerned about, really.” The same kind of frustration that the parents expressed with this attitude was also evident for some of the teachers.

I mean I wonder if they just feel it's okay as long as I pass. So therefore you know a C's good for them, and they don't have to put an effort into it.

(Intermediate Teacher 2)

Low effort and an acceptance of not working to one's ability were again linked in some teachers' minds. If a student was happy with low grades, which in turn meant there was no need to put effort in, then teachers believed that underachievement was occurring for these students.

³ Progressive Achievement Tests are Standardised Tests used to assess listening comprehension, reading comprehension, reading vocabulary, and maths in Years 3-9. Commonly referred to as PATs.

Low interest

Many of the teachers talked about underachievement in terms of a low interest level, in similar ways to those expressed by the other two participant groups. Some referred to low levels of motivation as being across all subjects, but others highlighted different attitudes towards specific subjects and felt these could be explained by the fact that each secondary school teacher taught a particular subject and was often unaware of a student's performance in other areas.

But it was just her lack of interest that was – and that can sometimes happen ... And if they don't want to do it and they're not motivated to do it then certainly they can underachieve.
(Teacher of Hubert Cumberland)

It's just a general "I don't care," sort of "I don't really want to do well."
(Teacher of Autumn Ashes)

Teachers spoke of students that they knew, when constructing their ideas, and there seemed to be a variety of opinions as to why a highly able student might show low interest. A common belief was that students were bored. Some teachers did not reflect, in the interviews, on the reasons for this boredom, but just stated that if a student was bored then he or she would probably underachieve. For example,

I've got a boy in my class who I believe is underachieving in certain subjects. Um, he is top in Social Studies for Year 9, but he gets bored at Maths and he gets bored at Science and he doesn't achieve because he's bored.
(Teacher of Marty)

Others saw that a lack of challenge, or repetitive work, might be the reason for low motivation to complete a task. Mr Bubbles' teacher felt that some of what he saw as more 'traditional' teaching practices, which might be based around activities that did not challenge students academically, might not encourage highly able learners to achieve.

It would be possible to be an able underachiever, yeah. Because some of those kids who are very bright find standard teaching approaches and being asked to answer 10 questions about something or fill in a closed passage about something, they find that very undemanding,

um, and therefore, yeah, they maybe don't even complete that because we're not stretching them.

Autumn Ashes' teacher was particularly concerned about a "bright kid" she taught, whom she saw as underachieving in most areas and she saw this being related to his lack of interest in any school areas. However, according to her, he was displaying interest and thus achievement in a sporting area and she wondered if this passion for his sport affected his achievement in school.

He just sort of switches off and doesn't seem, doesn't want to take part. But he is a really bright kid, he's just – don't know, he's only switched on when he wants to be, when it motivates him. I think he's sort of got that switch. That's one kind of an underachiever. Um, that's probably the classic example, isn't it, really?

Rugby is an interest for him, he's really interested in that, in his sporting area and he's wanting to achieve there, but not so much in his school work.

Several teachers mentioned a passion for outside activities affecting achievement at school. They perceived that there was a lack of interest by some highly able students for school tasks, but not for sport or music or an outside club activity, for example. The teachers spoke about students choosing not to engage in school-related tasks either because they saw no purpose in the learning. This was evident particularly in Year 10, when the exams were not seen as important, unlike in Year 11. Sometimes teachers felt students would not achieve purposefully "if they're busy in other areas [because] we might just be the lowest priority for them" (Teacher of Hubert Cumberdale). This was consistent with the students' views about the importance of the relevance of the activities in their learning.

Teachers talked about two more areas as being priorities over school work for students and influencing their levels of interest in school and underachievement for able students. Firstly, family issues were picked up on by the teachers.

I know that his parents have split up; it could be maybe to do with them not being happy in the home environment.
(Teacher of Autumn Ashes)

And it's usually it's not the boy has got themselves into, it's actually that their circumstances are such that they've got stuff to cope with that is just really difficult ... you know home circumstances like a bereavement of a parent – or had one of a sister, um, family break ups, it's all that stuff which happens to everybody you know, it's just stuff.

(Teacher of Kurt)

Secondly, teachers referred to an emphasis on negotiating social relationships that might lead to low interest in school and underachievement for some students. This allied with the comments made by the student group, who were aware that issues around one's social life could take precedence over achieving in one's school learning. Teachers felt that this could be because of too much socialising, as April's teacher points out:

Yet there's another student who I believe is perhaps not reaching her potential because she's interested in boys and make up and going out with friends and shopping and that sort of thing.

In contrast, teachers also felt that it could be that some highly able students who were not having success in adolescent relationships could have a lack of interest in learning and thus underachieve.

Ah, but I know that this boy had, you know, sort of issues at the start of the year where he...wasn't that settled, didn't have a good group of friends within the school, within the class, felt quite isolated, um ... not so much bullied, but probably was a bit, um, pushed to the side by some of the guys in the class, and so that's obviously had an effect on his learning in that first year.

(Teacher of Oliver Stone and Bruce Wayne)

The secondary school teachers who were interviewed seemed particularly aware that underachievement could be about a lack of interest in school activities because activities were seen as boring and unchallenging. Teachers were well aware that the issues around being an adolescent, which may include family circumstances, might be seen as more important for highly able students, a view that is supported by the major themes on the lived realities of these student participants that emerged from the data and that are explored further later in this thesis.

Lack of effort

Nearly all the teachers alluded to a lack of effort, which is connected to themes relating to low interest and not working to your ability, when describing what underachievement meant to them. As with the responses from the parents, colloquial terms such as “cruising” and “coasting along” were used, but a particular feature of the teacher group was the tendency to talk about students being “lazy.” For example,

She’s a bit lazy, not applying herself and so therefore she’s not reaching her potential. She’s coasting, she’s doing what needs to be done to try and satisfy the teacher.
(Teacher of April)

Because it’s easier to say ‘I can’t do it’ than actually putting in the time to do it ... Sometimes it’s a bit of a lazy approach.
(Teacher of Hubert Cumberland)

In common with both the students’ and the parents’ expressed ideas, teachers held the belief that achievement or one’s ‘full potential’ could not be reached if effort was not applied. There was also an overlap in ideas and arguments relating to a lack of effort and an acceptance of a mediocre result, as April’s teacher indicates above. If a student was allowed to “dash it off quickly and do enough to satisfy the teacher” (Teacher of April) then there was no motivation to put in any more effort.

Although teachers did recognise that highly able students could underachieve because they did not put in the effort, there was frustration expressed at this state of affairs by some respondents. This was similar to the views of some of the parents. They struggled to understand why such bright students might choose to put in only minimal effort.

He’s absorbing it and it’s in there in his brain, it’s all in there, but he’s just not willing to make a big effort ... You can’t sort of shake them out of it, you know, and you just do your best and hope he’ll do okay at school.
(Teacher of Autumn Ashes)

Intermediate Teacher 2 mentioned a boy who “was very gifted” but whom he saw as being “a very lazy boy” who did not produce anything to a high level. The teacher felt

he had tried his hardest with the boy but wondered whose “fault” the choice to forgo any effort might be.

Another teacher mentioned outside distractions as being a reason for a lack of effort, which showed an overlap between no effort and a lack of interest in school tasks when outside activities were deemed to be more meaningful.

So you know that they’re capable of this but they’re not putting in the effort because they’ve got other things that they’re doing.
(Teacher of Kurt)

It seemed that the belief that underachievement was about a lack of effort was doubly frustrating for teachers who saw this occurring with very able students.

Underachievement was about students being “lazy” and producing minimal effort that then led to a mediocre performance that was below that which could be expected. This was similar to the parents’ annoyance about an acceptance of mediocrity by these students. Both teachers and parents were expressing a belief in high expectations for these very able students and a corresponding disappointment that expectations were not being reached.

Lack of skills

A number of the participants from this group of teachers saw underachievement to be about not having the necessary skills needed to attain high achievement. They felt that even highly able students would be hampered if they had not learned self-regulation. This included self-management and organisational skills, study skills and social skills such as being able to successfully relate to their peers.

One of the intermediate teachers used this metaphor to describe his view on highly able underachieving students:

To me it was like, my analogy, ah, a very, a superb car but without really decent steering, you know, it was very ... very shaky on the steering, so they had, they had huge amounts of ability, but had very little structure in order to potentiate that ability.
(Intermediate Teacher 1)

He was of the strong belief that many of the students in his class were “underachieving the whole time they were here” because they had not been taught appropriate skills on how to manage their time or to organise their work. There was a veiled reference from him that the previous school was at fault (a primary school). He noted that some of his students had “been pretty much left to their own devices” and that they then struggled with the structure and the expectation that they should manage themselves while in his class. Interestingly, a high school teacher had similar views about a lack of skills and seemed to put this at the feet of a previous school as well.

And sometimes they don't actually have what I would call good sort of learning study skills or habits. Um, but I think it catches up on them later because they possibly have never really learnt, you know, like the skills for studying and for learning and the processes ... They've just relied on their raw intelligence.
(Teacher of Autumn Ashes)

Another teacher reflected on the overt signs of underachievement, from something like book work, but suspected that the poor work produced was because of low skills in writing or presenting and felt that this measure of underachievement was possibly not helpful.

So I suppose that's what underachievement looks like. I mean I could look at, I could look at Mr Bubbles' book for example and see that it was you know untidy and that the answers probably hadn't got that kind of thoroughness and that he'd been satisfied by giving one response rather than several responses or whatever it was and I'd say, yeah, that looks like underachievement to me, because I think that he understands more than that. And when we talk in class, you know, he, he does understand more than he's, he's able to write down.
(Teacher of Mr Bubbles)

One other response related to learning and study skills was about the different abilities students might have in terms of sitting exams or doing assignments. The teacher of Lewis noted that even highly able students might not perform well in exams, for example, because for whatever reason they did not have the skills needed to perform in an exam situation.

Self-regulation, or the lack of this, was mentioned by several of the teachers in relation to student performance and a student's social life. If a student did not have an aptitude for self-regulation then outside interests such as a flourishing social life could interfere with achievement in school. Conversely, other teachers believed that some students underachieved because they had difficulties in relating to their class mates.

But in terms of social underachievers, yes, they were. And they may not have had the skills in terms of getting to know one another and so on.

(Intermediate Teacher 1)

Yeah, I think with this boy his social skills aren't as developed as the other boys in his class. His organisational skills are definitely lacking. Um, yeah, and again, it's – we're teaching them these core generic subjects but perhaps we're also not teaching them those life skills, how to organise your life, how to plan things.

(Teacher of Oliver Stone and Bruce Wayne)

Oliver Stone and Bruce Wayne's teacher talked about underachievement for this boy as the combination of a lack of relationship skills and poor organisational skills. He felt that school could be teaching students about more than just academic skills but also about practical life skills.

For a large number of the teachers, underachievement was linked to poor self-regulation and in particular the lack of organisational and study skills that inhibited able students from producing high quality work. Teachers were positioning themselves in a professional role and making observations based on their professional concerns. There was a recognition that these students were highly able, but in terms of all aspects of the curriculum 'professional noticing' by the teachers meant that they were able to highlight gaps which might affect achievement. The teachers talked about recognising that these gaps were around the need to learn study skills to help them to achieve in academic-related tasks and also to develop relationship skills that would help, rather than hinder them, as they progressed through their school years.

Challenging the idea of underachievement

In common with two of the students, two teachers were not comfortable with using the term “underachievement” at all. They, too, seemed to problematise the term. One teacher began her musing about underachievement with the following statement:

I don't focus on this thing, 'underachievement.' I focus on getting them to achieve, you know.
(Teacher of Kurt)

She did go on to discuss the phenomenon but she wanted to make sure that her discomfort about what she believed was an inappropriate label for many highly able students was recorded. She preferred to focus on a positive construct rather than a problematic one. For her, any kind of underachievement was a result of influences outside of the individual, such as home circumstances, and this belief affected her understandings. It was interesting that this was the teacher of Kurt, who had also expressed his discomfort with the term.

The teacher of Oliver Stone and Bruce Wayne had talked about achievement in terms of having “good life values” rather than being just about school-based success and he saw underachievement similarly.

So I'm sort of loath to say that a student who doesn't achieve is a student that fails in exams. For me, that's not what it's about for me.
(Teacher of Oliver Stone and Bruce Wayne)

He believed that “there are other ways and other means of, you know, being successful in life.” He, too, was reluctant to see underachievement as solely a function of the student and mentioned the need to teach more life skills, as shown in a quote from him in the previous section.

Teachers understood that underachievement was about not working to one's ability. For the teachers, this was most commonly couched in terms of “not working to your potential.” This underachievement, according to the teachers, was associated with evidence in the form of low results compared to the results that had been seen previously from students. Underachievement was about low interest and incidents of boredom from students. They explained low motivation as being linked to having little enthusiasm for the subjects being taught, but also it could be to do with outside

circumstances such as family issues or a greater focus on extra-curricular activities. Teachers also recognised that underachievement could be to do with prioritising a social life. The failure to put in effort was a factor in underachievement, for the teachers, as was a lack of knowledge of the skills needed to complete school work. The teachers' understandings came from the position of professionals observing a group of students, rather than the more idiographic lived experience positions of the students, and to a lesser extent, the parents.

Understandings across participant groups: “Cos we’re all looking at it from a different point of view”

Perceptions from the three groups of participants in my study show that there are similar but also differing understandings about what the phenomena of achievement and underachievement may mean, as illustrated in the headings for the meaning units derived from the analysis. Although participants were aware of differing perspectives between participating groups, there is also considerable overlap between the discourses of students, parents and teachers (discourses being the ways particular groups value, think, believe within their social milieu, as described by Gee, 1990).

Student and parents were asked during their third interview if they thought that the three groups had similar or different views about the phenomena of achievement and underachievement. The teachers were not asked this question.

From the students' perspective it emerged that most thought that the three groups would look at the phenomena differently. Students had particularly strong views about what they thought teachers would see to be achievement and underachievement. They believed that teachers focused on their own subject only and were interested in test results or marks in general.

They take a generic idea on how you should be and like what your core, test results should be and things like that.
(Kurt)

They also saw teachers as being “tied to the curriculum” so that any measurement of achievement was made against the demands of a curriculum. Some students thought

that teachers would compare student performance to that of others in their class and so would look at whether a student was achieving or not in relation to peers.

Well, mainly teachers would see underachievement as you're underachieving compared to the rest of the class.
(Rambo)

In comparison to this view about teachers' understandings, the students felt that their parents would be more attuned to the understandings of the students themselves in that achievement was about a student trying to do his or her best and underachievement was when one had not tried.

I think parents would think more like us, because they're not there to make it worse for us, I'm sure.
(Rambo)

There was a view that, unlike teachers, parents had a focus on just their own child which meant they had a deeper understanding of that child's abilities.

They're not catering for a whole class either, so their focus is you, so they know you better and they know when you could have done better.
(Oliver Stone)

However, the students still alleged that their beliefs would be different from those of parents and teachers, in that it was their own perspective that counted in deciding what was achievement or underachievement for them, not those of the teacher or parent. Bruce Wayne saw his mother as holding both a teacher and a parent perspective that was in contrast to his own.

No, well my, my mum's a teacher and she doesn't like me doing bad in tests and she thinks that's underachievement, like not passing a test or getting Excellence in a test, that's underachieving, because she knows I can do better. Um, whereas for myself it's if I can do, if I can't do it, um, then I'm doing it to the best of my ability and that's achieving. Whereas Mum's is that mark.
(Bruce Wayne)

Students on the whole did feel that there were more differences than similarities between the three groups. When the question about whether or not they, as students, thought the same way about achievement and underachievement as their parents or

their teachers was put to them, the first response from all the students in the focus group situation was that they thought differently.

Most parents indicated that they too believed understandings would differ between the three groups. Kurt's parent used the analogy below to explain this:

Cos we're all looking at it from a different point of view. It's the same as if you and I both saw an accident now and went away separately and wrote down what we saw. We'd both see it differently. But you've got a teenager looking at the same thing as what their parents are looking at, as the teacher. Well the teacher's always gonna presume they're right. Um the parent's always gonna be a wee bit biased and presume their child's always right and they're gonna want the best for their child and then you've got a teenage opinion. And school sucks when you're at school, you know, when you're a teenager, it's a drag. So no I think you'd get three different opinions completely.

(Kurt's parent)

There were commonalities about how parents thought these differences would present themselves. Parents felt that teachers would understand achievement to be about doing well in exams or tests, but that for parents it was more about wanting their child to be happy, along with doing their best at school.

We say to our kids, "Well, to achieve highly is just doing your best in everything you do" ... And I think teachers probably think marks are it because the school is, goes on about how many NCEA passes it gets and the percentage. And I think that it's marks or yeah the percentage of kids passing this and passing that.

(Rambo's parent)

Oh, probably top grades. And yeah, getting the maximum number of students through at Excellence or whatever it is ... but [for me] as long as he goes on to achieve well and, you know, is happy.

(Marty's parent)

Parents agreed with the students' view that high school teachers tended to look at the phenomena only in relation to their own subject, unlike parents who would have an understanding of a student's entire realm of achievement or underachievement.

I mean teachers – certain teachers at, ah, at high school only see them in their subject, you know, and they're only interested in their subject. You know, they're not the slightest bit interested that this kid might be doing well on the cricket field – couldn't care less about that.

Well the parent – well, you'd hopefully think that a parent would perhaps see the whole picture and sort of, um, ah, you know, that it's not just clear-cut.
(Oliver Stone's parent)

In contrast, Lewis' parent thought there would be some convergence between groups as she thought it was important to acknowledge that "there are lots of different forms of achievement and I think most teachers and parents would recognise that." She also thought that teachers and parents would be on the same wave length when it came to underachievement. Hubert Cumberland's parent, however, was emphatic that "there would be a huge disparity between them [the views]."

Several parents thought that their children's understandings about achievement would be about getting good marks. This was more in line with the teachers' views. However, parental understandings were about more than just good marks. Parents were concerned with "the whole picture."

... kids would think to achieve highly is you get good marks in something.
(Rambo's parent)

Astrid thinks achievement is attaining a really, really, really good mark.
(Astrid's parent)

Some of these parents reflected the understanding that they knew their children had their own measurement of what underachievement meant to them and that they didn't want to be judged by anyone else, in line with a major theme from the students (about your own expectations). As April's parent explained:

Again, I think you've got to look at it from whether it's perceptions of others or perception from self. And if it's achieving less than either what you think you're capable of, or achieving less than what others assess you to be capable of.

Parents realised that some highly able students would view a 'Merit' or less than a high mark as underachieving since this result had failed to meet their own high expectations. But the parent may not see such a result as an underachievement at all. For example:

Astrid would see herself as underachieving if she didn't get above 90%. I'd, like, see underachieving would be if she actually got, you know, something at the 50% mark."
(Astrid's parent)

An insight held by these parents was that there could often be a gap in perception between themselves and their highly able children about what underachievement was about.

Other parents believed that, while teachers and parents may both be concerned about the phenomenon of underachievement, the students themselves were often either quite unconcerned and didn't see this as an issue of importance to them, or they would have no conception of the phenomenon at all.

I don't think they care if they're not doing that well.
(Hubert Cumberland's parent)

I don't think he'd know what underachievement was.
(April's parent)

Again, there was a strong belief that there would be disparity among the understandings of the three participant groups, for, as Kurt's parent put it, "we're all looking at it from a different point of view." There was, however, acknowledgement that it was possible that some understandings could be shared by participant groups relating to variations in ways of achieving or underachieving.

Chapter summary

The chapter provides a descriptive analysis which is a synthesis of the understandings that the participants from this study had about achievement and underachievement. Similarities that arose from the data are clustered in the form of meaning units. There were also significant differences in some of the views of some participants within participant groups and these are included to show an idiographic focus. Overall,

however, these findings show that there was considerable agreement across the three participant groups in relation to the understandings about the phenomenon.

When talking about what achievement meant to them, maximisation of abilities was a major premise for the student and parent participant groups. A common phrase that the parents used to describe this notion of achievement was to “reach one’s potential.” Consistent with this understanding about achievement, the students, parents and teachers all agreed that underachievement was about not working to one’s ability, or “not working to your potential.” All had difficulty in constructing an understanding of what ‘potential’ might actually be, although the teachers used examples of previous school or test results as a measurement of ability that had been evident previously.

All three groups focused on the idea that achievement was about a relationship between effort and ability. Parents and some teachers felt bright students were setting themselves up for failure if they did not learn that effort was important for achievement. Both the students and the teachers recognised that a lack of effort was related to underachievement with the teachers taking a performance focus and tending to use the term “lazy” in reference to gifted and talented students who were underachieving. Teachers also linked a lack of self-regulation skills with underachievement. Parents were adamant that any acceptance of mediocrity, by the students, was underachievement. Conflict around the different understandings of students, and their parents, about what was a mediocre performance, could arise.

Parents were strongly of the view that achievement, for them, was more about the well-rounded student. This seemed to be the preferred identity that these parents would like to see their child constructing, rather than that of a purely academic individual. Some teachers, too, saw achievement as being about more than measurable results and that other kinds of achievement were possible than that which was grade based.

The students strongly believed that both achievement and underachievement should be measured against their own expectations and not those of others. They felt they were the judges of what underachievement was in their own personal situation and it is possible that this could lead to tensions as they rejected others’ judgements of underachieving behaviours. Some student participants even expressed discomfort with

the term underachievement as they felt there were difficulties with the definition and that it could be reframed in less stigmatising ways. However, there were also some students who understood, like the teachers, that achievement was about performance and results or the work produced. They knew that for school success there was a 'game' that needed to be played. Nevertheless, according to all three groups, the 'achievement game' was unlikely to be played if there was a lack of interest in school-related tasks, or a focus on negotiating adolescent identity issues and the prioritising of a social life.

The understandings that the participants have are shaped by their thoughts, feelings and experiences as they try to make sense of their world and, in this case, of the particular phenomena that they were asked to reflect upon. The findings from this chapter point to further questions about what it is like for these gifted and talented students as they experience schooling life. What does it mean for these students to have understandings about achievement couched around the possibility of their presumed 'potential'? Parents would prefer their children to be well-rounded, achieving young people. Is this the most desirable identity for gifted and talented adolescents in New Zealand? Can these students perform as academic achievers but also balance this with a successful adolescent social life? What kinds of tensions exist for a gifted and talented adolescent negotiating a social place within their particular peer group in the context of their particular school?

This thesis turns now to a phenomenological analysis of the lived realities of what it is like being a gifted and talented adolescent in the environment of a New Zealand school.

Chapter Five:

Being in the World of School

Like – but I try not to care what others think because I’ve always kind of been the weird kid, but now I fit in with all the other weird kids.
(Autumn Ashes)

Introduction

This chapter presents a more in-depth exploration of the lived schooling experiences of the 11 adolescents. It describes findings in relation to the research question:

What is it like to be gifted and talented in the socio-cultural milieu of the New Zealand school?

Focusing on these lived experiences provides insight into the students’ understandings about achievement, by paying attention to context and to the realities that help shape understandings of who they are and what it means to be gifted and talented. The chapter aims to provide a structural description (as explained in Chapter Three) for the reader, that brings together the core meanings of the experiences for these participants of what it is like to be a gifted and talented adolescent learner in the contextual setting of a New Zealand school. Creswell (2007) reminds us that a structural description “reflects on the setting and the context in which a phenomenon is experienced” (p.159). This lived world of the students is relayed through their voices and further informed through the stories of their parents and the recollections of their teachers. The analysis is always interpretative; the participants’ meaning-making is interpretative and the researcher’s description of this meaning is interpretative.

As with the descriptive analysis in Chapter Four, I emphasise the voices of the participants. However, to further enrich the analysis in this chapter I also explore how the findings can be understood in relation to theory presented in the literature. This is done by making references to literature to help make sense of the students’ experiences.

To create a rich, structural description for this study, the shared experiences of the participants have been bracketed together within the major super-ordinate theme that

emerged from the data analysis, which was that of ‘Being in the world of school.’ Within this over-riding theme I explore the three sub-themes of ‘Being gifted and talented,’ ‘Being a high achiever’ and ‘Finding a fit,’ in order to reflect more deeply on the nature of the lived experience.

In addition, for each theme a reconstructed life story (van Manen, 1990), which constitutes an individual textural description (Moustakas, 1994) that illustrates or highlights the theme, is presented. These stories are drawn from anecdotal narratives told to me by the student participants, their parents or teachers, and reflect the thoughts and feelings of participants at the time of the interviews. In Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) the idiographic focus on individuals’ specific experiences is not lost in analysis even though there is an attempt to give an account of commonalities and of shared meanings. I was aware throughout the analysis process that the students, my cases, were at the “heart” of the research. It was important that some of their fuller stories were told. It was not possible to present a full summary of all 11 cases within the confines of this thesis, so illustrative cases are selected for the reconstructed life stories. However, extensive quotes from all of the participants are included in relation to the explication of each theme in these findings, in order to be true to the experiences of individuals and reflect shared meanings, and to demonstrate the co-construction of understanding in the analysis process. The selected quotes are drawn from conversations between the researcher and the participants, and between several participants in the case of the focus group interviews – conversations in which meaning was being negotiated and co-constructed.

A major theme: Being in the world of school

‘Being in the world’ as a gifted and talented adolescent, and in particular in the world of school, was the predominant super-ordinate theme that emerged from the data for this study. For these students, the continuing process of negotiating identities as gifted and talented adolescents impacted on their understandings about achieving or underachieving in school.

I begin with a presentation of the implicit views of giftedness and talent that this group of adolescent participants, and their parents, shared during the interviews. I then describe for the reader how these young students talked about experiencing being

gifted and talented. Their understandings about being high achievers in the ‘world of school’ are discussed. The final sub-theme looks at how these adolescents are finding their ‘fit’ as they negotiate their continuing identity development as gifted and talented students in their ‘world’ of school in New Zealand.

On being gifted and talented

It’s been interesting because you’ve made me perhaps think of some things: what does gifted or highly achieving mean, and really you don’t sort of, you have to sort of really think about that one sometimes, because yes, you sort of think, oh well he’s sort of that, but what does it actually mean?
(Rambo’s parent)

The students’ understandings about the concept of giftedness

It was evident that the students interviewed for this study found it difficult to articulate a definition for the concept of giftedness. However, there was one clear common theme in the responses from these young people. For them, to be gifted was to be above average, but not much more exceptional than that. Understandings about giftedness seemed to be influenced by an egalitarian philosophy; there was no room for the elite group (for example, a definitive top 1% of students) in their definitions of giftedness. The quotes below illustrate this point.

Probably having an average work level or higher than average people [laughs] standard.
(Marty)

Yeah above average, that’s about it, hm.
(Autumn Ashes)

Kurt was willing to go further and felt that being gifted meant that one was “above, above average,” maybe the top 20 in the year group, he thought.

It would just be, wouldn’t it just be above average, to be gifted and talented?
(Hubert Cumberland)

Smart. Being that notch above the average, you know, the Bell Curve?
Being in that section and above, it's gifted and talented for me.
(Bruce Wayne)

This tendency to lower the standard compared to how others might view what is seen as exceptional was a strong trend during the discussions about giftedness with all these students. There was a resistance to being seen as outstanding in an area. The students seemed to understand that the particular New Zealand cultural attitudes that helped shape definitions of giftedness promoted a more inclusive definition and their responses on what it meant to be gifted and talented reflected this understanding. In addition, none of these adolescents wanted to be seen as encouraging an attitude of arrogance or pretension that might open them up to possible taunts from peers at a later time. The question about what it meant to be gifted was asked early on in the focus group interview and it may have been that the adolescents were still feeling their way around the group situation with their peers. Gifted youth, like all adolescents, are well aware that the adolescent peer culture values conformity (Gross, 1998). It may be that for some students, a focus group situation was not conducive to openness in terms of responses about such a construct that could have personal implications.

It was also very noticeable that the students were reluctant to use the term 'gifted' itself. They preferred to talk about being 'smart' or 'talented' or 'bright.' Hubert Cumberland thought the gifted students were those "people in our year that are, like, really smart, it's like, whoa, that everyone knows them ..." and that "there's people that are amazingly talented." Others pulled back from offering any opinion about what the term might mean. Astrid nervously answered "I don't know" in the focus group situation.

When two of the students did try to define the term, it was interesting that the exceptionality component was again downplayed. These boys thought it was how you used the giftedness that you may have that was important and this was reflected in their attempts at defining what the concept meant. Aligned with their views about what achievement was about, they saw giftedness as having an effort component and that just being endowed with high ability was not going to be enough to get by in life. They understood that giftedness was not necessarily something that was constant,

such as an essentialist view would support (as outlined in the literature discussion in Chapter Two), but that it could be fluid and influenced by the amount of effort one put into an ability, thus adopting a developmentalist approach towards the concept.

Everything – there's obviously people that are gifted and talented but talent only goes so far. You always have to do some work and you have to work hard.
(Oliver Stone)

Because I don't really think 'gifted' is the right term, cos it's not like you're a chosen one. To me, a good learner and a higher ability, I think it's just because you use your brain more or you use it more constructively than others.
(Rambo)

The above comments are representative of a common stance from these students. They seemed to want to defend bright students from a 'luck' discourse (i.e. gifted students are 'blessed,' therefore they will succeed anyway) that might be levelled at them by others and thus they were eager to point out that one needed to work hard too; it wasn't just about having the brains. It was evident that the majority of these students seem to have taken on board the message from somewhere in their life experiences that 'talent only goes so far.' There was perhaps a tension for them in recognising that there were those, including themselves, who possessed high ability but that this needed to be reconciled with the knowledge that to be academically 'smart' was not necessarily seen as favourable by others. Certainly, the understandings that all three participant groups had about achievement, presented in Chapter Four, included the need to put in the effort. It appears from their talk about what giftedness meant that it went further for these young learners; giftedness was about working hard to get the top results and this was part of a defensive coping strategy against accusations of having it too easy because one was already 'blessed' with a good brain.

The parents' understandings about the concept of giftedness

Parents talked about giftedness in similar ways to the students. They seemed to carefully avoid any mention of exclusivity and thus the definitions they chose to use

were less about exceptionality in comparison to some of the discourses in the international literature (Dai, 2010; Silverman, 1993). Similarly to the students' responses, they saw the concept as being "beyond above average," "above the standard for the year they're in," and "just the same as highly able, really." Parents positioned themselves firmly behind an inclusive philosophy, in line with the ideas outlined in the New Zealand MOE (2012a) handbook and the ERO (2008) report. Several recognised that there were various domains of giftedness – the domain-specific view – and that it was not just about an academic domain.

But I can appreciate that she meant that gifted and talented doesn't just mean that you're good academically, it also means musically or in your chosen field, whether it be drama or, practically, or whatever
(Kurt's parent)

Another parent said that "I think you can be a gifted football player," and another admitted that she usually thought of gifted as being in the academic area but she understood that her own son was a "gifted cricket player." This may have been because these parents had been exposed to some information about gifted and talented education from the teachers at the intermediate school, Skye, which all the students had attended, but this cannot be confirmed from the data from the interviews.

There was a negative perception of the elitism that some thought could be associated with giftedness and most parents were quick to distance themselves from this kind of viewpoint.

And when you go to a school like Braemar School, that badge wearing of the Gifted Name, the Gifted club, the Gifted morning teas, the very rich, diagnosing anybody – it just absolutely didn't fit with me at all.
(Hubert Cumberland's parent)

Parents were much more comfortable with the idea that one could be gifted in any area of human endeavour and certainly supported the socio-cultural view predominant in New Zealand education policy (Ministry of Education, 2002) that a gifted person can be found in any socio-economic group. They were adamant that a gifted person could be from any walk of life and disputed the perception they sometimes heard from the lay population that more gifted children came from "certain schools" or "wealthy areas." One parent admitted she had a "hang up" about the term.

So that's my personal hang up on what is 'gifted'? Just because she goes to a particular school, just because you are a doctor and the next person is a builder? I've got that in my family too – one went to university and is now head of department, um doing well and good on him and he has set himself goals and he's now in Hong Kong/Singapore. The non-achiever in the family I'm really proud of because he took himself off to become a painter and he set up his own company. Is one more gifted than the other? I don't believe so. They've achieved to the very best of their own abilities and that's how I see it.
(Bruce Wayne's parent)

The language used by Bruce Wayne's parent illustrates the confusions that arose for these parents. There is a desire to hold on to egalitarian views – giftedness is achieving to the very best of your ability in any field of endeavour and open to a range of people from a range of backgrounds – yet many are still wed to the stereotype of the academic achiever. For example here, the non-academic, a painter, is labelled the “non-achiever.”

Parents talked about their children being recognised as gifted by teachers or other professionals but they were not confident in articulating a definition of giftedness themselves and often not willing to assign the label to their own child. Although they would be happy to admit that their child was ‘bright,’ it appeared that identifying them as ‘gifted and talented’ was a step too far for many parents.

If somebody else assesses him as gifted and talented, great, wonderful, fine. If that means – and probably this is where I would, I don't care what the label is, as long as the teachers give him what he needs.
(Bruce Wayne's parent)

‘Bright’ is a term that is attached specifically to academic intelligence and perhaps the parents’ acceptance of this as a label showed that there was still some confusion over understandings about what it meant to be gifted and talented. Identifying their child as ‘bright’ seemed to comprise a more acceptable, colloquial discourse. This term attracted fewer unfavourable connotations from others than did a ‘gifted and talented’ label.

For some it was easier to normalise the behaviours of the child, perhaps as a cover against seeming too proud of their child's achievements. There was obvious pride, "his goal is to do two PhDs," but it was also apparent that it was not easy to attach the gifted and talented label and it was often laughed off by parents, such as in this quote below.

I have trouble comprehending that Kurt's in – considered gifted and talented, you know, but that's because I have to live with him and the smelly feet and the laziness of leaving cups in his bedroom and so you sort of think, "well, if you're so damn gifted and talented [laughs] pick up your coffee cup."
(Kurt's parent)

In addition, these parents were not comfortable in revealing to their contemporaries that their child had been nominated as gifted and talented (if this was the case). For them it was not something that was talked about over the tea cups, contrary to the oft-reported stories of 'pushy' parents, that are popular in media articles on gifted children (see, for example, Anyan, 2012). These implicit views could have been influenced by socio-cultural context, something suggested by one parent, who came from North America originally, and who made the observation that there is "the Tall Poppy Kiwi thing" where people are reluctant to give credit to those who have performed highly and are instead more likely to denigrate high achievers than praise them. The idea that one needs to be careful not to place oneself above another, or, in this case, one's child above another, was evident in the views of these parents about giftedness. They were happy to accept that giftedness was about exceptionality, but for many children in many different areas, and they believed that care should be taken that the concept did not become an exclusive one. One parent said that she was against the "gifted label" because it could become a "badge of honour" for the parents and she, for one, did not like to see "negative behaviour where kids are pushed beyond what I felt was good for them ... but the parents were so pushy." All of these parents seemed to want to distance themselves from this stereotype, although it appeared that a couple of them had encountered examples of what they saw as this "pushy parent." For these participants, their public views, at least, about giftedness and talent, and their understandings about the abilities of their own children, were very much constructed within inclusive, egalitarian discourses of understatement rather than overstatement.

On themselves as gifted and talented students

The students were asked to reflect on themselves as gifted and talented learners. Although they were encouraged to be as openly honest as possible about their abilities, there was a very strong tendency on the part of the students to downplay the idea that they themselves might be gifted and talented. This was not surprising given the students' responses to the questions on definitions of giftedness and talent in general. It appears that there is a shared values construct for both the students and their parents, which is to tone down definitions of giftedness and talent in order to avoid any accusations of elitism. The following conversation with Lewis illustrates this trend towards modesty around the abilities of the participants.

L: Hm, bright-ish, but not – I don't think I'm terrifically bright, no. Everyone's got to work hard at things.

But you're not willing to sort of go further than that and say "I'm a really able student."

L: No, I wouldn't do that, I don't think.

Is that because you don't feel comfortable talking like that?

L: No, I don't think I feel comfortable talking like that or I don't want to be like that.

Why don't you want to be like that? What do you feel it shows?

L: Hm, being up yourself or something, I don't know. I don't think that's me, really.

But if you were totally honest with yourself and you were comparing yourself with um – you know, if there was you and a hundred other 13-year-old boys, where would you say you would be?

L: Top-ish end. I don't think I'd be the top, but I'd be ... in the upper quarter or something, I'm not sure, maybe – upper half.
(Lewis)

Lewis had just won a prestigious academic scholarship to a local high school against a great deal of competition. Lewis' responses during this conversation may have been guided by his own personal modesty or by a desire not to stand out. His fear that he might be seen as "up himself," as boasting and arrogant, reflects the view of most of the students in this study. The students acknowledged that they found it difficult to categorise themselves as gifted and talented learners or highly able learners, when asked, and would prefer that someone else made that judgement. They were aware of the negative connotations that publicly declaring oneself as clever in a New Zealand school setting might bring. In their schooling world, students are expected to be modest and self-deprecating about their abilities and it is not appropriate to publicise one's own academic achievements. In the words of Kurt:

And, or else they turn around and get all offended and upset or something cos it's just the world we live in sort of likes everyone to be and just be the same and equal and blah blah.
(Kurt)

Students understood that 'smart' pupils who acted like they were better than others could be subject to derision and contempt. The participants were also aware of wider societal expectations and that New Zealanders put a high value on attributes such as humility and modesty.

Comments like "I'm sort of up there, but I'm not like the best" (April), or "I do pretty well, like, compared to most of the class" (Astrid), were the kind of responses the students from this study gave to describe themselves and their abilities. The students had a fine line in understatement as most of these students would have been very close to the top of their classes in academic ability and several were very talented musically and in the sporting arena as well. It appeared that they were already well aware that it was more socially appropriate to distance oneself from a gifted and talented student identity among the wider peer group and this stance was being maintained even when among a group of similarly able peers.

One student in a focus group did attempt an honest self-appraisal of his abilities and faced peer mocking (laughter) when he used the word "excel," which was perhaps predictable.

Um, ah ... well I don't refer to myself as smart. I'm just a normal person – I just excel [other participant laughs]. What's so funny?
(Bruce Wayne)

This was a young man of strong social standing and all-round ability who was able to rebut easily without appearing affected. This is an example, however, of how difficult it may be for most able learners to appraise and describe their abilities without facing the chance of being belittled in a group situation. It also shows how a peer group works to co-construct meaning by checking understandings and bringing members into line with 'group' thinking.

The gifted and talented adolescents in the study were cognisant of the expectations of society that New Zealanders do not want a country of 'tall poppies.' Hubert Cumberdale felt that this attitude was rampant in New Zealand: "Like, wherever you go there's always going to be someone that's got, like, Tall Poppy Syndrome and they wanna let either someone else down because they're smart."

Although they recognised the existence of broad social values relating to the Tall Poppy Syndrome, some students also resisted the attitudes attached to these expectations. Kurt expressed this belief aptly in the quote below.

Yeah, it's society in general sort of, you learn like, the society we live in sort of says to people: keep, try and make everyone feel the same, and try and make everyone feel like they're special in their own way, but – so don't talk about how you're better than someone. And maybe that's why we all find it so hard to say ... I don't know, people generally put themselves down all the time.
(Kurt)

Marty reflected his discomfort with adhering to the required egalitarian stance. He felt that students were often put in difficult positions when they were asked to self-evaluate their school performance.

Yes. The self-assessment type things are always hard. Cos if you say that you're too – if you're too sort of – how do you say it – if you say that you're too good, then it's sort of being boastful but if you're saying, if you say that you're too bad, then it gets, um, like dishonest as well, so yeah.
(Marty)

This could be seen at one level as a personal gripe from Marty, but Astrid concurred that she too found this a dilemma when she admitted that “it’s harder to say I am good at something.” April struggled with an appropriate discourse for conceding that one was talented at something and she gave the example of when she was selected for a New Zealand youth orchestra – one of only two of her age in the country for her particular instrument. She found it awkward dealing with the public accolades, from teachers, for this achievement. She was justifiably excited and proud of her accomplishment, but at the same time aware that she couldn’t be seen to be arrogant about it and she didn’t quite know how to respond to the congratulations when they were handed out in front of her peers.

... and so every teacher was coming up to me and, “oh you must be really good.” But you can’t say “yes I am” and you can’t say “no I’m not” because you can’t, like, tell them off for telling you that.
(April)

There was no doubt that these students were aware that they were ‘bright’ and they tended to view this ‘being bright’ as a far more acceptable category than being ‘gifted.’ ‘Bright’ seemed to be a euphemism that they could accept. They evidenced this by the successes they had had during their schooling years such as, “I got put in a couple of extension things” or “I kept getting acknowledged all the time.” Or one student noted that “sometimes you get something and you realise – you get that right or whatever and you start feeling like you’re a bit of an able student” (Kurt). The achievement was invariably downplayed through the language used but there was an honest admission that they were more accomplished academically compared to many others of their age.

It seemed that this group of students found it easier to normalise being bright when they were in high stream classes (also variously called accelerate classes or full-time special classes in the literature, and called high ability classes at Skye Intermediate) and they appeared to see less risk to their social identity in a class of more like-minded peers. They were more relaxed about being seen as smart in this kind of context, and as one young person said, it was “really easy because I’m in a streamed class and so it’s really not that hard, it’s just a normal life” (Bruce Wayne). Another also identified the feeling of belonging to a similar group:

I don't really notice any like special attention or anything, but that's probably because our whole class is, um, high achieving rather than – so they don't just go up to one person and expect different things from them.
(Oliver Stone)

The students said that “we don't really talk about it in class too much” when I asked if they ever discussed the fact that they were all smart students in their class.

It appears that within a streamed class, a student could become part of a group identity. Instead of the constant pressures that can come from standing out, from being the different one, the pull to be part of the adolescent peer group could be served within this class of more similarly-minded students, albeit still a very heterogeneous group. Bruce Wayne's parent describes what it was like for Bruce when he moved to the streamed situation at Skye, from a smaller primary school.

But towards the end of the year [at primary school] he didn't want that anymore [to be the only one working at his level]. He much rather wanted to be part of a group. And probably the one comment that Bruce Wayne made about going to Skye, he was among others, equally bright. He was no longer the brightest; he would be pushed by the others. Um, and that will probably be in some ways what might possibly help – he doesn't like to be the shining star, possibly because he's had it for so many years.
(Bruce Wayne's parent)

Kurt agreed that he no longer wanted to be the one that stood out as he moved onto adolescence and he somewhat cynically remarked that “it's, like, boring being told that you're the best in the school at this and the best in the school at that.” The “boring” was likely a cover for the fact that he was beginning to be taunted by his peers for the constant attention he was getting and he was very uncomfortable with this situation in a small school.

The students were developing the understanding that to stand out in an adolescent world could lead to social exclusion. Finding a group was paramount. Belonging to a streamed class was an option that seemed to suit these young students. There were opportunities to retain their identities as able learners within the class but still be part of a social group with other adolescents, with whom they felt an affinity. All the students indicated mainly positive experiences of being in streamed situations, despite

such classes often being positioned in less than desirable ways by peers in the wider school population.

Success in belonging, for these young people, was very much related to the social context of the school or class in which they found themselves, a finding that is consistent with other recent research, including Eddles-Hirsch et al. (2012). These students reported that a streamed class, such as the Skye class, fitted their affective needs as well as their academic needs. The identities these students could develop as gifted and talented learners were more comfortable for them in a streamed class. Here, they felt they were able to develop successful relationships with like-minded peers and be part of a group with which they felt some connection. Despite not always being “the shining star,” as Bruce Wayne’s parent puts it, these students felt a sense of belonging when placed in a class with other highly able students. This finding is consistent with international literature. Rogers (2002) for example, in her work on the grouping of gifted and talented students, similarly argues that students were likely to make meaningful friendships in such a class placement and that, contrary to some teachers’ opinions, “ability grouping is more likely to make the gifted child more aware that there are other children as bright or brighter than he is” (p. 234). Riley et al. (2004) report on some New Zealand research studies that found that students involved in streamed classes were overwhelmingly positive about the academic and social outcomes of participating in such a class, although they did mention negative responses from peers who were not in the streamed class. An Australian study (Wolf & Chessor, 2011) looked at peer victimisation for gifted and talented students in schools and found that inclusion in a streamed class, as well as in special programmes for gifted learners, could work as a protective factor for those students who were exposed to victimisation from their peers. This is in line with the responses from the students in this study who were relaxed about “being among others equally bright” as this was actually a comfortable group for them. The students from this study were sending the message that streamed classes are a comfortable fit for most gifted and talented students academically and socially and emotionally.

This analysis is also consistent with literature that has looked at issues around gifted and talented adolescents and identity. Adolescence can be a time of great uncertainty for young people, but the feelings of difference that are often exacerbated by the

academic and affective needs of gifted and talented adolescents can make this period even more confusing for this particular group (Dillon, 2011a; Eddles-Hirsch et al., 2012; Gross, 1998; Vialle et al., 2007). The process of self-acceptance for adolescents is strongly driven by the value others give to them, and feelings of inadequacy can emerge in relation to the way others see them (Ellsworth, 1998). The need to belong, to be a part of a group, intensifies during adolescence (Clark, 2002). There can be particular issues for gifted and talented students, which Neihart (2006) terms an achievement/affiliation conflict. They are faced with contradictory expectations about what their goals should be in adolescence: whether to concentrate on high achievement in school-related tasks which may be viewed negatively by the peer group or to focus on constructing a social identity that fits in with the majority peer culture, but which may undermine potential academic achievement. Gross's (1989) term for this predicament that many gifted students find themselves in, is the 'forced-choice dilemma.' Vialle et al (2007) maintain that for gifted and talented adolescents, the process of working towards an understanding of identity is often exacerbated by their giftedness and the added tensions that this can present. As Dillon (2011a, p. 28) points out, "having to juggle the internal and external demands and expectations of a talent with the management of complex emotions along with all the typical aspects of being a teenager" can lead to pressures for these adolescents, which are likely to impact on their growing sense of self identity. Addressing the challenges of adolescent identity negotiations can be the difference between achievement and underachievement for some gifted students.

The need to belong was just as strong for these gifted and talented adolescents as for any adolescent. Part of this 'belonging' profile was the desire not to be seen as different. They were cognisant of the cultural expectations of New Zealand society, which, as Kurt alluded to, were to "try and make everyone feel the same." To avoid any chance of social exclusion they understood that they must not appear to be superior or arrogant and thus they characterised their abilities in terms of 'above average' rather than exceptionality. There was a shared understanding that students who achieved highly at school were conspicuous among the peer group and in New Zealand schools, and it was not desirable to stand out as a 'tall poppy,' particularly in an academic area. The students were reflecting the premises around conceptions of giftedness presented in the literature in Chapter Two, which alluded to the cultural

tendency for conformity, influenced by strong egalitarian traditions (Knudson, 2006; McCann, 2007; Moltzen, 2004). This observed desire to conform is in line with other studies which suggest that an attitude of anti-intellectualism in Western countries works to produce tensions for intellectually gifted students and that they then face a forced-choice dilemma (Jung, Barnett, Gross, & McCormick, 2011).

The views that these adolescents hold about giftedness are important in terms of their development as gifted and talented individuals for, as Clark (2002) maintains, it is these perceptions that “determine their actions and responses to society” (p. 199). The fact that these students saw giftedness as negative, in terms of its social implications, could eventually lead to a dumbing down or even withdrawal of high achieving behaviours. However, although there were achievement/affiliation conflicts at work for these student participants as they chose to downplay their constructions of what it meant to be gifted and talented, at the same time they stated that they were aiming to continue to achieve in their areas of talent. Neihart (2006) reports that achievement/affiliation issues often lead directly to academic disengagement for many gifted students, but this did not seem to be the case for the students in this study. Keen (2005) found similar results to this study, in that his New Zealand case study students “drove themselves in academic and sporting competitions, risking peer jealousy in the process” (p. 214) but chose to continue on a path of achievement. Keen notes that his participants sought public recognition in the school, despite the chance of social derision from classmates. This was not the case for these adolescents in the current study. They were not comfortable about advertising their abilities publicly. Nevertheless, they all seemed to be at least talking about heading down the path of achievement in private. For them, a fundamental part of ‘being gifted and talented’ was ‘being the high achiever.’

On being the ‘high achiever’

The students in this study understood that there were particular expectations for high achievers in both school and extra-curricular activities. However, for them the most powerful expectations were those that they put upon themselves (see Chapter Four). All of these students reported that they valued high expectations in their learning. This aim could lead to tension for some, who were struggling with developing identities as

highly able students and did not want to stand out from the crowd of mainstream adolescence. Nevertheless, for these students, peer rejection or periods of past underachievement had not, at this stage in their schooling experience, led to a lack of motivation to set high expectations for themselves for future school success and for life post school. Negotiating a successful social 'fit' at school was always foremost in their minds, but not at the expense of aiming for high achievement in academic and extra-curricular areas. Being the 'high achiever' appeared to be an integral part of 'being in the world of school' for these students and this was being negotiated along with a range of factors associated with being a young adolescent.

Aiming high

The students' responses about being a learner in school were couched in terms of high achievement as the goal. Several of the students openly admitted that they loved the stimulation of challenging learning: "I do love my school, I love learning, and the school helps me do that" (Bruce Wayne). Marty's parent said that Marty "just loves to learn and keep learning." Even Rambo, who had received some less than complimentary reports from his teachers about his recent progress, was still reporting that he wanted to 'be' a high achiever.

Um, well when I got my report from the end of last year I wasn't that happy because it wasn't that pleasant to read because it was saying I wasn't focussing and wasn't achieving what I could be achieving. That was a bit of a let-down.

Um, I just get a good feeling when I've achieved something.

Rambo knows that his effort needs to improve but he is still talking the talk about wanting to do well: "Well, I aim to get Excellences, because it's not an impossible mark." Despite peer pressure to dumb down and a lack of enthusiasm for the actual work he needed to do to progress his studies, his comments suggest that he remembers the positive feeling of being a high achiever and thus will set his expectations based around this profile.

The high expectations that these young people set for themselves are evident in the way students talked about their achievement aims. Most believed that one should try for the highest goal possible.

I'm aiming for a first, but I guess I can be happy with a second or a third as well. But I've gotta aim for the top one and not below.
(Autumn Ashes)

Ah no. I don't think I'll [laughs] ever be an Olympic Gold medallist but it doesn't mean that you shouldn't still sort of try in those areas.
(Marty)

There was the feeling that as a highly able student one should always attempt to aim for the top, perhaps reflecting a healthy self-efficacy from many of these students.

I put it to myself to do it and cos I know that I can so I – there's, I've got something where I believe if I can do it, I can do it. If I can't, I'll try but there's never that 'you can't do it' thing.
(Kurt)

Parents agreed that these adolescents set very high standards for themselves.

Because there is the ... false implication I suppose or false idea that a high achiever does it easy – they don't, because they put very, very high expectations on themselves.
(Parent of Astrid)

This parent, along with others, expressed admiration for the exacting standards that these students put upon themselves. There was an acceptance that the students decided upon their expectations themselves and some parents were rather amazed at these children of theirs who aimed so high in their achievement goals. Marty's parent felt that "he will be striving for excellence, it's just the way he is." Bruce Wayne's parent commented in a similar vein – "I think he would always want to strive for the Excellence" (meaning the NCEA ranking of Excellence).

There was a feeling that some of these students had a sense of honour in keeping up their own standards of high achievement. Mr Bubbles' father thought that his son's pride in being a high achieving student meant he would not contemplate allowing himself to fall back in his work standards at school. Kurt admitted that "the whole

thing of not being able to get to where you believe you can get to is, I find, disappointing for myself, and yeah, I don't like it much." For some of these students it appears that their sense of identity was becoming firmly based around their achievements as able learners, and if they were not succeeding in their area of ability (or abilities) then they felt some of their uniqueness was lost. There could be a feeling of responsibility towards others, such as their parents and even teachers – of not wanting to let people down by not achieving and not living up to their potential. For some who had always been positioned as highly able learners by parents, teachers and peers it could be difficult and unwelcome to lose that part of their constructed identity.

Setting goals

Aligned with the notion of being a high achiever was the belief that it was important to set high but realistic goals for oneself. Most of the students saw goal setting as important as a tool to help reach the high expectations they had for themselves – expectations and goals were linked. April's parent felt that April would "always keep setting herself goals above what she's achieved, so she's always goal-setting and seeing that she can achieve higher." Bruce Wayne points out, "The goal is something that is going to challenge you, cos if you don't have a goal then there is nothing to aim for."

The students were cognisant of unreasonable expectations and the importance of goals that were challenging but achievable, as both Hubert Cumberland and Kurt explain.

Yeah, the whole 'aim for the stars, get the sky' – ah, it's, in my opinion that's basically saying that the goal's at the max and you'll get reasonably high but not being able to – never being able to reach that top mark, I find, is almost unreasonable to try and put that on yourself, to be able to reach something that you can't and that's impossible really.
(Kurt)

So the ones that seem more realistic, but they're not too realistic, they're not easy to get but they're just above what you can do, they're just above what you can reach, they're the ones that you always strive for and they're the ones that you're most likely to reach.
(Hubert Cumberland)

It was interesting that these students understood that there are risks implicit in setting goals too high for very able students. The research literature has addressed similar ideas in relation to the failure to reach impossible expectations that can have detrimental effects on the well-being of gifted and talented students (Morisano & Shore, 2010; Rimm, 2006). Kurt and Hubert Cumberland, and several other students, talked about the importance of setting high goals that required effort but they felt that, ideally, one should not place unrealistic burdens on oneself that could lead to stress and anxiety.

The students were clear that they liked to be aiming for something specific in their academic work in particular. It was interesting that some found that the Year 10 level was frustrating because of the lack of defined goals in that year. For example:

I was a bit disappointed because um my English teacher said, "Oh the last year to have fun." But I thought you know Year 10 is preparing you for NCEA, so you should be working towards that – just like intermediate's preparing you for high school; Year 10 should be, it shouldn't be like such a big jump when you do NCEA.
(Oliver Stone)

Others also spoke about feelings of frustration that work in Year 10 lacked purpose until the push towards exams at the end of the year. They liked their goals to be relevant, which to them meant being about what they thought they might need to know in order to prepare them, broadly, for life. This can be linked to their views about underachievement being about low relevance, as discussed in Chapter Four. Most were quite future-oriented with their goal aspirations, which linked with their perceived positions as high achievers and who they wanted to become as people in the future. For example, Oliver Stone commented,

Well I don't know what I want to be, but I know I don't want to be like a plumber or something, you know.
(Oliver Stone)

The notion that setting a goal of being a plumber was not good enough was interesting. Oliver seemed to view such a career as not being one of high enough 'status' for a student of his academic ability. These students had particular ideas about the kinds of future careers that they viewed as acceptable in terms of the high

expectations they had for themselves. These beliefs may have been influenced by the kinds of messages they received from parents, teachers and others about being students of high potential. Several of the students talked about future aspirations which included nuclear medical physicist, PhD qualifications, journalist, palaeontologist and representing New Zealand at hockey. Some admitted to future goals to be school prefects or sports captains. All seemed to see themselves as high achievers at school and then in high status, highly qualified professions. They were beginning to look at setting academic-related goals to work towards this, or, as Astrid described her motivation:

Well I just think that if, like – if I do well, like, now and learn as much as I can now then, like, I'll be more prepared for like later and then I can, like, get into a good university if I want to and then I can, like, do well in that and then do well in life.

The students were focused on goals for themselves and for what they wanted to achieve and this did seem to be allied to their own views about “just knowing where you're heading.” They preferred to be left to concentrate on these on their own, resisting pressure to share their goals with others. Marty voiced this when he thought:

... it's fine to set goals for yourself and say, you know, oh I want to be able to do this by the end of the year, but having to sit down with a piece of paper and write for your teacher, you know, 'oh I want to be able to do this, this, this and this' – it's a pain and I don't think it really helps.
(Marty)

The students' views are echoed by Siegle and McCoach (2005) who suggest that, for gifted students, goals should reflect an attainment value: the extent to which students see a task as meaningful to their core ideals. Siegle and McCoach advise educators and parents to “personalise the school experience by helping students integrate academic goals into their ideals” (p. 10). These students' comments about looking ahead to future roles are in line with Siegle and McCoach's views that goals need to be aligned to utility values or how a particular school task relates to a young person's vision of the future. Some writers have found that gifted adolescent high achievers show an early determination of career direction in contrast to gifted underachievers who do not (Emerick, 1992; Peterson, 2000; Siegle & McCoach, 2005). It would seem

that the students from this study are reflecting the findings from literature about the tendency for those gifted and talented students who are developing their identity as high achievers to motivate themselves through a goal setting process that is personally meaningful and intrinsically appealing for them. Year 10, with its lack of focus in the view of these students, did not seem to support students in ways that personalised an individual's future plans and thus it was seen as an irrelevant time for many of these students. Doing well in exams, however, was a step on the pathway towards career goals that were relevant and could be said to have both utility and attainment value.

“I can do better”

For many of these students, the notion of being a high achiever revolved in part around the expectation from themselves, and sometimes from others, that they could be doing better. This seems to relate to the discourse that is frequently used for gifted and talented students and was discussed both in relation to the literature in Chapter Two and in the findings in Chapter Four – the idea of ‘reaching your potential.’ Being gifted and talented and being a high achiever means doing the best you can at all times, so that you will reach your potential. For many of these students it seemed that they felt this message strongly. They often used the phrases “it was not good enough for me” or “I can do better,” perhaps reflecting feelings of inadequacy and the particular pressures that they and others put upon them and which can be seen as what I am labelling the ‘burden of potential.’ For example,

For my other subjects I probably, I could have done a bit better, like in Maths I would have thought I would have aced the exam, but I got 113 out of 120 and that just wasn't good enough for me.
(Bruce Wayne)

Lewis reported in one of his Reflection Sheets that he would have liked to have got Excellence in his end of term Biology exam; a Merit wasn't good enough. A specific experience that Autumn Ashes wrote about in her Reflection Sheet is quoted here:

Overall, I was disappointed in my report. I can do so much better, especially in the homework area if I put my mind to it.

Parents reported that their children would also talk about certain results not being up to their high standards.

And she said anything less than Distinction is not good enough.
(Parent of Astrid)

Marty would say achievement isn't good enough, I mean you need Excellence. It's not good any more to be an achiever.
(Parent of Marty)

Views are based on previous experiences and instances when the students have and haven't lived up to expectations. It may be that the memories of peak moments, when they enjoyed the feelings that success brought, encouraged them to continue along an achievement pathway. For students like Rambo, this presents a problem. He still sets his sights high, but at times he has been struggling to reach his own and others' ideas of what his actual capabilities might be and he has talked about his disappointment in himself. His mother reports that an 'Achieved' mark would not be satisfactory for him.

... but if he just sort of, you know, I mean if ever he sort of got under his expectations of things that have maybe just been Achieved, he's been disappointed. You know, like if he's done the New South Wales – they call them something else now – and he's just got a Participation, I think he got, you know, cos he does quite well on those tests, and he said, "Oh," you know, and he was absolutely, you know he got Participation on it and over whatever the average was, but it wasn't good enough for him.

Rambo is faced with the conflicts that ensue from wanting to do better and to 'be' a high achiever but also grappling with his place in an adolescent social world. He also appears to be beginning to understand that a greater effort is required now in order for him to achieve his high expectations. Rambo says his reports usually say "achieving, but not to Rambo's potential." It is interesting to note that Rambo's mother mused that she didn't think that school would be the place where Rambo's potential would be fully realised and that "I think that Rambo will be, you know, Rambo's potential will be probably when he leaves school." Whether or not this view has had an influence on Rambo is unknown. It may be that Rambo is relying on a change in his

school environment rather than any change in his own behaviours to reverse the downturn in his performance of late.

Several students felt that parents reinforced the expectation that they would “achieve their potential,” particularly because of their high abilities. Oliver Stone reports that he does want to achieve highly in all areas for himself but that he also has some pressure from his parent about doing the best he can.

Dad hassles me all the time about doing better and stuff, because, um, he got a uni scholarship at the end of, in Year 13, so, like, he’s really smart and he knows that I’m smart and always thinks that, or seems to always think it’s an underachievement or that I could do better rather than an underachievement. So even if I’m achieving, he’s always thinking about doing better. So he’s always, like, telling me that I should be studying more and working harder at something.

Oliver was in two minds about the benefits of this input from his father – “they just really want the best for you” but “sometimes it annoys you.” All the students were positive about the support that they received from their parents, but some of their comments indicated a gradual drawing away from the acceptance of decisions being made entirely by parents and as the move towards adolescent independence increased. A further example is of Lewis’ parent who states that she still reminds Lewis to stay on task with his schoolwork:

And you know, sometimes I think it’s necessary to say hard-nosed things like that. It would seem a bit harsh, um, because there are realities but, you know, Lewis won’t be happy if he’s washing cars for the rest of his life.

The implication is that “washing cars” is not Lewis reaching his potential. However, in his Reflection Sheet Lewis rejects his mother’s interference in his school tasks when he writes that one of the things that did not work well for him was that “my mother likes to constantly ask me if I have done my prep/hwk.”

The students felt that their teachers, too, would position them differently from their peers because of their status as highly able learners and more was expected from them as school students at all times and not just in their area of talent. Several mentioned that teachers thought that able students should “be well-behaved or perfect at P.E. or

something” (Lewis), or “you’re in the top class, I expect more from you” (Kurt), for example, just because they were bright. Some described how they felt there were “too high expectations of you” and that adults expected better performances because “there’s more potential” (Oliver Stone). Similar results were found by Eddles-Hirsch in her 2009 doctoral study. Her highly able participants from the “opportunity classes” (another term for streamed classes) were expected by teachers and parents to lead group projects and generally behave in a more mature way in playground situations.

Being the high achiever meant that these students felt that they should constantly try to do better, to live up to high expectations, which was sometimes couched in terms of realising one’s potential, as with Rambo’s case in the illustration above. This was part of who they were. There was a quandary for them in trying to understand what was meant by ‘doing better’ or by ‘reaching one’s potential.’ They did not pretend to know where their potential might be but that did not appear to stop most of these adolescents from trying to get there. Oliver Stone admitted, “I don’t think anyone knows how far they can go.” Bruce Wayne agrees with much of the recent literature when he says that “you can’t measure potential” and then makes a fine distinction between reaching one’s potential and what the concept is actually about, in his view.

Um, my potential, it’s what I can achieve, not what I’m willing to achieve, it’s what I can achieve.
(Bruce Wayne)

Most of these students were constructing identities that included being high achievers and were setting expectations that matched this identity, holding to the belief that they could achieve at high levels. For all of these students, the knowledge that they had abilities coupled with past experiences of doing well, resonated with them, as evidenced by Rambo whose performance was slipping but who still saw himself as being able to succeed in school.

For some, their determination to keep to these expectations could create tensions for them and, at times, stress in their world. For some, trying to reach the high aims that they continue to set for themselves may lead to underachievement in their eyes and a lack of confidence in their ability to continue to reflect the identity of the high achiever. The story of April embodies the experiences of one young gifted and

talented girl as she learns to deal with some of the tensions that seem to be related to the discourse of ‘being a high achiever’ in the world of school.

April’s story

April is a very focused young girl who places high expectations on herself to do well in her academic work and in her extra-curricular endeavours. She is a talented musician and has also been involved in singing in choirs and in dance. She admits that “I just wanna keep, keep going forwards, because I just really wanna do really well.” April’s intermediate teacher from Skye described her as “a very hard-working student who is always striving to do her best, um ... and almost at a point of being on edge, anxious about doing her best.” However, he had expressed concerns about what he saw as April’s extreme push for achievement. “She was about perfectionism” and he seemed to allude to this in a negative sense. He thought that periods of anxiety might have contributed to health issues in her final year at Skye.

... she constantly was complaining of stomach pains and it just seemed to me that it was unrelated physically. It was more related mentally. And I just think it was, she was so, she’d driven herself into a hole where you’d expect perhaps someone of senior years to be, not someone of that age.

Both April and her mother referred to the health issues at this stage of her schooling but neither directly linked the health issues to anxiety about school achievement in the same way that the teacher had. There was a difference in interpretation about the cause of the health problems but both parent and teacher were genuinely concerned about April’s loss of confidence and growing anxieties. April, at this early adolescent stage, had issues with self-confidence and appeared very sensitive to the views of others. This did not make for an easy start to high school.

At the start of the year I found it really hard to settle into Staffa College because I had to get used to a whole different environment. I also had some major health problems which made me feel sick. I felt that I wasn’t paying as much attention to my school work and thus did not do as well.
(April)

So the growth in self-confidence is probably the thing we’ve noticed most because we were so concerned at that at the end of Year eight and going into high school, she was, she was quite – well, we were very worried with a degree of ill-health

and the um, sensitivity issues and that lack of self-confidence.
(April's parent)

April may have grown in self-confidence with some positive results at her high school, but her natural tendency to worry about her results, about whether or not she will reach her own expectations or whether she will do as well as others in her class who are also high achievers is something that appears to be very much part of her developing identity. The quotes below illustrate the ways in which April constantly thinks about negotiating her place in the world as a high achiever.

And I really like to be able to understand something and know what I am doing because I know if I don't, then I will just get really stressed and worried and concerned about the next lot of tests that we have to do on the same thing, because I'll just, um, think that I don't really know what I'm doing.

Um ... ah well there's an expectation on myself – but we've covered that. Like, I like to do well and it's just so that I feel, like, comfortable I guess, because all this stuff that we're doing at the moment, all the tests that we're doing, are gonna matter at the end of the year and if I can do well now, it's going to help me at the end of the year. Like, when we sit all the big exams for the year.

Like, the teachers don't do it on purpose and they're all telling you, oh it doesn't actually matter, you know, it's just a test to see how you're going. But then it's just, like, well actually it matters to me. Everything matters [laughs]. I'm worried that I'm not learning enough which is making me stress!

I know that if I don't work hard now, it will all catch up on me at exam time when I don't need any extra stress!

April frequently refers to 'stress' when she talks about her learning but she cannot seem to help herself from striving to reach the highest levels of achievement. She does try to take on board the advice of teachers and her parents, who do support her desire to do well but not to the extent of making herself unwell. The push to always achieve highly does seem in the main to come from April – "I know that I have many expectations on myself" – but it may be that this was something that she has developed as a result of being in an environment with a gifted elder brother and parents who strongly encourage excellence. Her mother acknowledges this striving for

perfectionism in her daughter and understands that these are April's own goals.

Occasionally, you know, gets she a bit tired or a wee bit, um, loaded down by the work but a lot of that comes, I think, from everything has to be done to such a high standard, it's the perfectionism coming through with her. But that's, that's the standard of the work she always wants to hand in so, um, that's just, that's just April to a T.

She sets her own standards, and if she doesn't reach what the standard is that she wants, then she feels she's let herself down.

However, coupled with this strong desire to succeed April also fears what she sees as failure.

Now I am nervous about my maths unit standard on Friday. It is a pass/fail test with no room for error. I have worked hard, and I understand what we have done. I really do not want to fail.

On my first test on pathogens and diseases I was very rushed and I wasn't fully understanding the concepts that we had to study, in that test I only got Achieved. It really bugged me for a while because most of my class got Merits and the girls that got As were the girls that never did homework and talked through class; it really sucked because I felt that I was being classed as a bad student because of my bad results, even though I had done heaps of work and studied very hard.

She compares herself against her peers in the high ability classes: "I hate it when some of my friends get higher marks than me" and "I have not done as well as some of the people I would like to be on a par with." Generally she accepts that anything less than a satisfactory performance is due to her own actions. She does also face issues of multi-potentiality, in which she has pressures to complete extra-curricular demands as well as school-related tasks and at times these get in the way of optimum performance for her. She places some of the blame for her stressful life on the outside environment and other people and seems to be seeking help to solve her problems.

I am finding it very hard to find a good balance between school and extra-curricular activities like music. I find that the extra-curricular activities take up all my lunch breaks and some of my after school time and thus making me very tired and making my school work come second. I am a bit annoyed that

other people cannot help me keep this balance ... But to do better in my learning I need to have a healthier balance of extra-curricular activities and schoolwork.

She understands that in order to reach her high expectations she needs to put in sufficient effort and this doesn't seem to be a problem for April. In fact, it could be interpreted that the pressure she puts upon herself to be the high achiever is adding to her stress as she appears to want to relax her standards slightly (and "blob out in front of TV") but she cannot seem to let herself do so in her drive to reach the high goals she has set.

They want us to have a really good work ethic, which lots of us do, um like I'll come home, have a break, do homework, do music, do more homework, go to bed.

I still find it hard to focus on homework when I get home each day. I would much rather blob out in front of TV for a few hours – but I need to focus, focus, focus or otherwise I will not do well in exams.

The high school seems to have been a good fit for April. Her mother believes "it's a really caring, nurturing ... school. Excellence is, you know, it's driven for and it's celebrated." April is positive about the culture of the school and gives the example of when "I won the Cup for Speaking for Year 10 and 11. Everyone has been really supportive rather than jealous," which seemed to surprise her and indicates that this may not have happened in her past experiences of achieving highly at other schools. Her mother had mentioned the growth in self-confidence as April settled into the high school and by the middle of Year 10 she was positive about April's development from the overly anxious pre-adolescent of her last months at intermediate, to a much more confident young girl who seemed secure in her particular school setting.

She's become much more of a social, a much more outgoing, a much more confident sort of girl than she was the end of Year 8. She's built so much more self-confidence, um, that that's led her to become a much more outgoing sort of girl as well.

It appears that April will continue to push herself to be the high achiever as she continues through her schooling years, and aligned with this, there is likely to be worry and stress around the expectations she places upon herself. Her high school teacher echoed the sentiments of her intermediate teacher in her description of April:

She's extremely hard-working, diligent, so very, very focussed on anything that she does. I think that she maybe at times perhaps could relax a little bit about things. But everything she

does, she puts her heart and soul into, constantly sort of exceeding expectations and, and sometimes I worry that, you know, what's, what's going on in her life, to enable her to be able to do that? Is she sort of work, work, work and not enough play?

This inner drive to succeed seems to be a stumbling block for her when she tries to find the balance in her life to prevent her becoming stressed. She is still unwilling to give up on her high goals in both school work and extra-curricular activities; the “healthier balance” may be some time off for April. Her goals are very firmly based around success at school and in a future career and in reaching the high expectations that she will continue to set for herself in academic and cultural endeavours. However, it appears that at high school April is learning to adjust to the pressures of a busy life and is choosing to continue on her path of high achievement. She derives pleasure from the acknowledgement of her efforts and enjoys the success that this brings for her.

We got our reports from school at the end of Term 2. I was very pleased with my comments and they showed my efforts in all my subjects had paid off. I was a bit bemused at some of the comments my teachers said because they never really said anything to me about how well I was doing.
(Reflection Sheet)

It is how April manages her competing aims, and negotiates her multiple identities to allow for the balance that she is seeking in life, that will be important in the future for this gifted and talented adolescent. April's story is about how a gifted and talented young girl works to combine her aim of being the high achiever with a sense of well-being that may help her to reach her future goals while treading a less stressful path.

The complexities of negotiating adolescent identities as high achievers within the socio-cultural milieu of school were becoming evident to these gifted and talented students. For these adolescents, the identity of being the high achiever was one that all of these participants adopted for themselves and which was cast on them by others, such as parents and teachers. Being in the world of school was about being the best you could be, about setting goals that were at a level commensurate with someone of high ability. Despite forced choice dilemmas or lower performances at times, their perceived identities as highly able learners influenced their views of themselves as being high achievers in the future.

Nevertheless, fitting into a supportive group was not always easy for these particular students and the following section presents data around the challenges of shaping identities and finding a place in the world of school as experienced by these adolescents.

Finding a 'fit'

The culture of the school

'Being in the world of school,' for these students, was very much about finding a fit in the overall culture of the school in which they were experiencing their day to day schooling. The students I interviewed had specific ideas about the culture and character of the local schools. There was a general understanding among the students that a particular school was "like that" and during the focus group interviews there was definite agreement among the students about the culture of a particular school. For example, the requirements for fitting in at one local single-sex boys' high school were described this way:

And I reckon if you went to Jura School and you weren't that sporty, it would be hard for you, because it's such a sporty school, you're sort of, like – if you like want to, like, fit in or whatever, you are sort of required to, you know, it seems as if you're required to, like, play you know, play sport and be really good with it.
(Hubert Cumberland)

Another school was characterised differently:

It seems like really geniuses go there a lot.
(April)

So Islay is the academic school?

It's what the stereotyping says, yes.
(Bruce Wayne)

Parents were well aware of the differing school cultures too. One described Jura School thus:

But, um, but there's a lot of sort of um, I don't know whether 'macho' behaviour's the correct word, but just a lot of stuff that I wouldn't be surprised if it just goes hand in hand with the school, that – and the whole culture and the sports and stuff, yeah.
(Oliver Stone's parent)

Another parent affirms the students' opinion of Islay School by stating that at this school "for somebody who's quirky or academic, there's plenty of scope to explore" (Lewis' parent).

These students had definite opinions about the different kinds of identities that adolescents might be developing and how these disparate identities might fit within the school cultures that they attached to various schools. A boy who was more academically inclined may not fit in so well at his all boys' school, according to Bruce Wayne, because "it's not really that widely accepted. Like people prefer to excel in sport." The perceived identity for this boys' school was that of the sporty, non-academic male, an identity that seems to have been constructed from a traditional background of maleness (one where sporting prowess is revered) that has been ingrained into the school over time.

All the students observed that if a bright student is good at sport in our New Zealand schooling culture, they are given 'the pass' from their peers and are generally accepted into the top status of the group dynamics of adolescent peer culture. Conversely, the participants reported that those students who were academically advanced and not sporty would be consigned to a lowly status in the social pecking order and likely to be targeted as 'nerds.' The perceptions these students had on the discourse of being a 'nerd' is discussed in more detail in a later section.

The link between sporting involvement and social success came through strongly from all three participant groups in this study. Gifted and talented young people were far less likely to be positioned as 'others' by their social peer group and subjected to taunts and name calling if they were involved in, and especially showed aptitude for, some kind of sport.

Um, he does the sporty thing and sports boys are jocks and golly, aren't they this, that and the other thing. So I don't think Bruce on a

one-to-one, being on the receiving end, I don't think he's been there.
(Bruce Wayne's parent)

Although the students recognised that this was a commonly held view by many of their peers, those student participants who were gifted and talented in sport (for example, tennis, cricket, hockey, and cross country) noted that they craved recognition from their peers for their academic abilities as well and rejected what they saw as the stereotype of an unintelligent sporty adolescent. They valued their sporting expertise, but also felt that there could be equal recognition for academic prowess and that their peers needed to acknowledge abilities across domains.

In relation to constructing a social identity and fitting in socially, the students thought that being able at sport could be both beneficial and a tension for gifted adolescents.

Hubert Cumberland tries to explain this:

Like, so – cos I like, cos I'm, like, I like sports, so I'm sporty, but I'm not, like, really dumb so I think that if you're sporty, that sort of gives you, like, the pass that you're not. Like, generally, like, on the outside, if you're looking at someone, if they're sporty, then they think, "oh well they're sporty, then they're not going to be smart, so we're not going to call them a nerd," you know.
(Hubert Cumberland)

The students acknowledged the positive side to being sporty in terms of social standing but they also perceptively recognised that the pendulum may swing too far to the side of sport as a valued talent among New Zealand youth. Data suggests that these students were beginning to realise that adolescent identities could be developed that comprise various strengths and some wanted to stand up for this kind of individuality. They were actively resisting what they saw as commonly held notions of the 'sporty' adolescent or the 'brainy' adolescent.

You know like people think that ruggers are real like big and whatever and you know and they don't really take like that like intelligence comes with sport. You know like you can't do everything, so they sort of stereotype people that are really good at sport as being real like dumb, I know that's portrayed through like the media like through movies and things that shows that like people that are real high-achieving with sport aren't normally really brainy.
(April)

These young people were vocal in their distaste of stereotypical thinking, as shown in comments like “they’re putting us in a box.” Such comments are likely reflecting their own experiences. They frequently shared examples of how their age group represented certain groups in their schools, such as “Asians generally get called nerds,” “the popular ones,” and “the plastics.” They felt that their peers would often put people into supposed group categories in their schools and make judgements about certain students, with some admitting that they sometimes fell into the trap of doing this too.

I think it’s kind of, maybe then when people start to get, like, kind of more judgemental of other people and more aware about how, like, people are different and they, like, kind of judge people and stuff more.
(Astrid)

However, they were certainly resigned to the fact that certain schools had reputations for cultures and philosophies that were grounded in the perceptions of the students from the schools within the district, more so than those of the teachers and management. These perceptions appeared to be firmly established and the students seemed to be rather disappointed in, and also critical of, the narrow views held by their peers about the various local schools.

“You want to be like everyone else”

For the students in this study, there were particular challenges in negotiating and developing identities as an able student. They believed that playing down any differences was a popular strategy for many gifted and talented students, certainly in preference to accentuating any dissimilarity. As mentioned in the previous section, several of these students talked about not wanting to stand out, and they were willing to adjust their behaviours in order to conform.

Several of the quotes in this section come from parents and from teachers. The views of the parents and teachers provide another lens on the lived experiences of the students and, as such, are presented here to help provide a fuller, deeper meaning of the lived world of the participants. The parents, in particular, seemed to be very aware

of the struggle that many of these gifted and talented students face as they work towards finding their fit in the social context of the school environment.

Um it's still a non-acceptance really and the Tall Poppy Syndrome's still out there and a lot of these children don't want to stand out from the others. I think we've got to do a little bit more in that area. And at high school I guess, you know, it's the fitting in, like, the identity, you want to be like everybody else
(Autumn Ashes' parent)

The parent of Autumn Ashes brings in the “Tall Poppy Syndrome,” which was also mentioned by other parents when they were discussing how gifted students were reluctant to be singled out for attention in a New Zealand school setting (see also the section in this chapter on parents' understandings about giftedness). The parents emphasised the desire of most adolescents to merge into the crowd and be like everyone else. Parents saw that part of developing an adolescent identity was to feel like they belonged to the group and to try to conform. For some gifted and talented students though, this was not easy. The particular challenge for these students was that they were often positioned by others as being outside of the norm if they were seen as being too different in their behaviours.

Being the 'all-rounder'

Oliver Stone's mother used the example of Oliver's father, who experienced difficult social times as a gifted student in his school years and she seemed keen for Oliver to avoid the same situation. She looked for a more normal socialisation for Oliver, a way of being more like everyone else, and along with most parents supported the idea that it was better not to be seen solely as an academic student (see Chapter Four).

Yeah the social thing. The, um, you know not wanting to be um ... you know, perhaps the teacher's pet or the nerd or the whatever. You know, if you feel like you've got a certain standing with some of your friends, then, um – I mean I don't know that Oliver Stone is like that, I'm just saying that, yeah, that whole image thing. I know that [Oliver's father] was a very, ah, able student at school and, um ... you know and he was very much classified: oh well, you know, you're brainy or whatever and, um, and he used to get a hard time for that.
(Parent of Oliver Stone)

Bruce Wayne's parent, too, recognised the advantages of having abilities in several domains, of being identified as an all-rounder, in deflecting any negative positioning from peers within the context of school.

I don't think anybody has ever called him a nerd, possibly because he's one of those people who seems to be an all-rounder.

Teachers also picked up on the social issues that some gifted students faced and suggested that the best approach for fitting in was to cultivate an all-round identity, in line with the parents' views. One teacher reflected on the gifted and talented boys at his school, who the teacher thought had perhaps chosen to identify with a purely academic identity, and surmised that they were often not socially adept. He compared these boys with Lewis, whom he saw as an example of a "perfect all-rounder."

I mean the boys – well, just gifted on the academic side tend to be labelled ... They may be recognised for what they do in terms of the academic side, but, ah, they are not the guys you want to be friends with, you see what I mean?

But certainly he's not someone who is picked on, picked on for this. And he's not someone who's labelled as other boys could be because they are sort of more one-dimensional, which he isn't at all. He's – I mean, you know, the perfect all-rounder.
(Teacher of Lewis)

This teacher could be seen to be guilty of the stereotypical views that the students were so against, but his reflections were based on students that he had taught and thus he was using anecdotal evidence for his claims. It is interesting that he is also reflecting the broad cultural understandings of the well-rounded young man that seems to be desirable in New Zealand secondary schools. In addition, several of the students themselves talked about the perceptions they heard among their peers, of the smart kids who "did their homework at lunchtimes" and who were not in the "cool" group so they, too, were aware of the stereotype of the "one-dimensional" academic student. It seemed that most of these students wanted to distance themselves from this particular stereotype.

The students reported in Chapter Four that there were times when fitting in with an adolescent social life was perhaps more important to them than achieving highly

academically, reflecting Gross's (1989) idea of the forced choice dilemma. For some students it was better to be part of a 'cool' group than to achieve a high grade.

Autumn Ashes sums this up:

Like, at high school it kind of just doesn't really matter, there's more important things than who's smarter than who.

It seems that for most of these students, a focus on negotiating successful peer relationships was the most important thing on their minds. Many gifted students become skilled at code switching – the “process of deliberately changing behaviours to accommodate the expectations of an environment” (Neihart, 2006, p. 202). They observe the way their peers act around them and then make choices about how they need to act in order to fit within a particular social context. For these New Zealand students, one way they described that helped this blending in process was to try to be the all-round student in school. This was what was seen as the best position for an adolescent in the New Zealand school context. It was better for one's social kudos to take part in a sport of some kind and other extra-curricular activities, rather than focus purely on academics. If one was going to be smart, then it paid to be good at a range of other activities as well.

The class clown

Another option that some gifted and talented students chose in order to try and 'fit in' was to be a 'class clown.' Rambo's intermediate teacher reported that “he was just, the Bart Simpson, I call him. But he was just the class clown for most of the first year.” Rambo switched to being the joker in order to gain social status in his class, following some incidences of being called “geeky four eyes” by his peers, a nomenclature he was keen to avoid, as his mother reports:

And he said, oh, you know, but then he'd say, “oh, you know, it doesn't really matter.” But [laughs] you know, it would.
(Parent of Rambo)

At various times in his schooling, Rambo has tried to fit in with the more socially acceptable peer group, but with limited success according to his mother. Like Oliver Stone's parent, and most of the other parent participants, she was concerned about

socialisation issues for her son. Rambo reputedly has a tendency to labour a point when he is debating issues and this doesn't always go down well with his friends, nor, it seemed with some of his teachers, as both he and his mother admitted.

... the other thing was, I think, sort of socially sometimes because he's not that overly sporty, he'd join in but he can be quite persistent and things and I think that other kids didn't appreciate that side of him so much. So, you know, we've had talks about that over the years, how you have to be a bit more compromising and see other people's point of view as well, not just yours.
(Parent of Rambo)

This student saw the entrance path to the 'cool' group was through sport, but when that failed he found that adopting the joker persona at various times in his early high school years helped him to find some kind of acceptance in a social context. Rambo being the class clown is evident in the quote below, about an incident in his English class:

I also made one of my friends laugh so hard mandarin came out of his nose. I guess that's an achievement.

Bruce Wayne's mother also alluded to her son acting like the "class clown" when he was at primary school, in what appeared to be an attempt to distance himself from being the "shining star"; the one who stood out as the high achiever. According to his mother, Bruce became uncomfortable with this kind of recognition and used humour to deflect attention from his abilities.

Rugby boys and 'bubbleheads' – being 'normal' males and females

Their search for an adolescent identity, and to fit within the culture of the school in which they found themselves, was an on-going one for all these students at the time of interviewing. I introduce this section with a particularly moving story told to me by Kurt's mother, about her son's struggles to find a 'fit.' Kurt is a young gifted, male attempting to discover his identity in a social milieu that was not naturally comfortable for him. This story is an illustration of how gifted and talented students

work to blend in with what they see as the normal gender cultures within their schools.

The multiple perspectives that the research methodology allows for are reflected in this reconstructed narrative as the story is based mainly around the thoughts of Kurt's mother, with some comments from Kurt himself. In his individual interviews, Kurt did not refer directly to any concerns that he had over socialisation issues within his school peer group, stating in Year 10 that "there's nothing really negative" about school. This comment came from his interview in May. His mother's comments, illustrated in the quotes below, were from an interview with her in June of the same year.

A story about Kurt

Kurt attended Jura School, the all boys' school which the students had described as the "sporty school." Kurt did play some sport, but was more interested in music and computers. His mother notes in an earlier interview that:

I'm very happy, hugely, and proud of him. But I think there's a flipside to that. Um, because he's one of the kids that is doing his homework at lunchtime, he's, he, um is not seen as one of the cool guys, and I think that's the thing that obviously most teenagers wanna be, accepted.

Things had changed for Kurt by the time he was in Year 10 (age 14). He was wary of being different and desperately wanted to be part of the mainstream adolescent school culture at Jura. Kurt brought out what could be seen as the 'tough boys' school talk' in his second interview when he made excuses for a broken finger which he received in a fight at school.

I only broke my finger and I almost broke his nose, but no no it wasn't that bad [laughs] it was more of a ah 'teenage boy Jura School thing,' it happens nearly every day, you just, it doesn't matter at school, it's – and it's almost a good way to let out any steam you have ...

This seemed to represent a marked change in attitude for him from his time at Skye when he was more interested in music and history and general knowledge.

He had recently chosen to take up rugby as a sport at the school. It seemed that he was attempting to code switch and become one of the 'rugby boys.' This

had not been at all successful and, as his mother recounts, the students on the sidelines were merciless in their taunting of Kurt's prowess on the field.

Oh yeah these guys were pretty horrid, at rugby. And I don't know if the whole – you know, what the other people are like, but these half a dozen boys who were at rugby, that was the only person they took the mickey out of, all day. Yeah. Oh God "Kurt won't know" "oh yeah here we go, Kurt's going to get the ball – don't touch it, Kurt." He couldn't hear them. And then when he ran, they were all imitating the way he ran.

Kurt's mother identified the culture of the school as a catalyst for the choices that Kurt was making. It appeared that the teasing that his mother had witnessed may have been openly directed at Kurt over time and this led to him withdrawing from peer relationships.

I think it's part of that whole boys' school testosterone, New Zealand culture rugby playing mindset and Jura High School is unfortunately – I mean most boys' schools are – it's rugby, the, it's a big culture at it. And I think that was part of Kurt wanting to try and be accepted as 'one of the lads.' But there's also been a significant drop-off. Kurt doesn't hang out with friends anymore – like cos he doesn't get many texts anymore, the phone doesn't ring anymore, and on the weekend he's not, doesn't go out with anyone. He's just round home.

His mother noted that his school work had not been affected at this stage and it is not known whether underachievement in school-related tasks eventuated later. (His situation was not followed up after the study concluded.) Additionally, concern about Kurt's state of mind had been noticed by the school, which had prompted the counsellor to approach him. Kurt himself reported this to me in an off-hand manner during the focus group interview.

No, she thought I was depressed and, ah, a whole bunch of really long words and, ah, put simply, being bullied and stuff, emotionally and verbally and I cracked up laughing at her.

Apart from this comment, Kurt chose not to share these adolescent experiences relayed by his mother. I did not quiz Kurt about his on-going situation, in the focus group, as I felt it was not appropriate to do so in front of his peers. He seemed to be hiding behind a mask of bravado and the discussion that followed this comment revealed that visiting a school counsellor was another behaviour that was seen as 'uncool,' embarrassing and perhaps a sign of weakness, especially for adolescent males. The counsellor was not the first choice for these students if they were having issues, the students reported, although that did seem to depend on both the school and the particular counsellor.

This story suggests that when they find themselves part of the kind of cultural milieu that a school like Jura seems to represent, boys like Kurt feel pressured to develop identities that are often incompatible with their real interests and abilities. In this case, the consequences for Kurt were the opposite of what he had intended in terms of social acceptance. Kurt's story is about a gifted and talented adolescent experimenting with his way of being in the world of school, trying to find where he fits as an individual in the socio-cultural milieu in which he finds himself. He was trying on another identity as he worked to find that fit. He reverted to code switching in an unsuccessful effort to fit in with the normative masculinity discourses he saw as acceptable within his particular school culture. It is possible that strong gender influences within Kurt's school culture were having an impact on his developing identity construction.

Negotiating gender stereotypes

This story is similar to the findings from an Australian study by Monceaux and Jewell (2007) who found that the gifted adolescent boys they interviewed were influenced by gender stereotyping.

The students expressed the view that males are enculturated to act strong, tough and cool. They do not want to be recognised for their intellectual ability, as this is not seen to be cool. This appears to have a profound impact on the social and emotional development of the male adolescent, and thereby it indirectly and directly influences underachievement. (p. 32)

There were those bright young males who chose to ignore the stereotype but most chose to blend in, to normalise their behaviours and this seemed to be Kurt's choice at this time, albeit somewhat unsuccessfully in terms of his social and emotional well-being.

Similarly, Mr Bubbles experienced discomfort at being separated from his sporty male "mates" when he was first placed in the accelerated class at Skye Intermediate. His parent reports "suddenly Mr Bubbles is in a streamed class over there and these guys are still back here, and I think they gave him a bit, bit of grief about that." Mr Bubbles distanced himself from what he perceived as the academic group at his school, surmising that he had little in common with that group, and aligned socially with a sporting peer group while playing down his intellectual abilities. He didn't like being called "smart" and said that "I just prefer to be normal." This appeared to have

worked for him by the time he reached high school. Despite being identified at his primary and intermediate schools as a highly able student, Mr Bubbles' high school teacher did not see him as a high-achieving learner. Rather, he identified Mr Bubbles as fitting in successfully "within a group and socially" but academically "he was doing Ok, but really, if he'd applied himself he could have done a lot better." Mr Bubbles was an example of one student, who it appears, had chosen to focus on what he believed was a normative masculinity, rather than achieving to his academic ability in his school situation. For him, being a 'normal male' means fitting into a sporting culture. He was not failing, was doing "OK," but had chosen to be "normal," "like everyone else," rather than stand out as highly able.

Oliver Stone, who attended the same school as Kurt, saw the culture of Jura School in a different light. He did not think that a boy would be excluded from social groupings if he was not capable at sport.

You're encouraged to do it, but you're not forced to and you're not judged because you don't play a sport. Um, it's not like if you don't play sport then you're in a different group of everyone who does play sport.

Possibly just when people get a bit rowdy sometimes, things get out of control – but that's, boys will be boys, I guess, yes. It doesn't happen to people unless they're really looking for it to happen.
(Oliver Stone)

Oliver's understandings are in contrast to those of his mother, who talked about a "macho culture" at the school. Oliver appears to recognise a masculine sporting culture, but doesn't experience it as the dominant and negative force in the same way as Kurt does, or he sees it as so established and accepted that he does not see fit to challenge it. His response could be interpreted as his believing that he had succeeded in fitting in to the school as a sporting boy and thus he may not have been as aware of the 'outsider' students who were still trying to negotiate their way into the high status groups at this particular school. However, Oliver Stone himself was still working hard at becoming part of a large group of sports-oriented and socially active boys within his school cultural milieu at the time of interviewing. His cricket prowess was admired, but he thinks that he was seen by others as being "too smart." Thus, even

with a top sporting ability he was struggling to be accepted as one of the ‘cool’ group of sporty boys and was perhaps feeling the tension of wanting to achieve well academically but finding that this was not valued by the group to which he aspired to belong.

Girls were also susceptible to conforming behaviours that resulted in their compromising their identities to fit in with the mainstream crowd. Autumn Ashes relates the story of one of the girls in her high ability maths class, who adjusted her behaviour in order to be part of the dominant group which displayed particular feminine gender stereotype behaviours. The girl appeared to see this code switching as important for her social status within her co-educational school culture.

... but she is really smart and you, she’s a really good artist as well because I’ve seen some of her work around the school. And I know that she can do Maths and I know that she’s, can do well, because I’ve seen one of her test results and but then when she – most of the time she just doesn’t try and she sits in class putting on makeup and has a little mirror on her pencil case.

(Autumn Ashes)

Autumn Ashes called these girls “bubbleheads.” They were highly able students but they chose to behave in certain ways in their classes as Autumn Ashes describes.

I sit here, and I have like little bubblehead, bubblehead, bubblehead, bubblehead, bubblehead, bubblehead, bubblehead all around me and I’m, like, right in the middle. And I get all the gossip and I get the notes and the cell phones, like, being lent and thrown across my head. The girl sitting across from me always asked to borrow my stuff and she never remembers my name. It’s a bit bad.

April gave an example of girls in her top stream class who “were chatting rather loudly instead of doing work, making the entire class off task” and “a couple hid around the class and ran outside.” These behaviours were then publicised on the social media site Bebo and were seen as trendy among the peer group at April’s school.

The students agreed that, often, smart girls were exposed to the messages that popularity is more important than academic success, “the biggest group of friends that think they are the popular ones” (Hubert Cumberlande), and thus many chose this route rather than working openly towards school achievement. Additionally, girls were

apparently supposed to be able to converse on 'feminine' subjects such as fashion, boys, and make-up which Renold (2001) also found in her study of 'square girls,' a term used in Britain for high-achieving academic girls who found themselves ostracised as 'squares' if they didn't learn to engage in the popular discourses of the group. The girls from this current study all reported incidences of tension between the girls in their peer group that affected them in varying ways: "Still a lot of bitchiness in Year 10; I guess I ignore it but still gets to everyone in some way" (Hubert Cumberdale).

Most of these student participants admitted that constructing a social identity was extremely important to them, which for many involved conforming to gender stereotypes. The success or otherwise of this socialisation process had an impact on their fit in the school environment. They wanted to be seen as 'normal' adolescents who enjoyed the same kind of activities that their peers did. For example, Bruce Wayne believed that his social life kept him "sane" and that if he didn't have a social life he "would go crazy." Most admitted to conforming to the 'rules' of socialisation among their peers and were wary of being seen as outsiders in a social context but for many there was a tension involved in merging success in school work with working towards success in social relations.

Conforming to the norms of the adolescent peer group, sometimes by using code switching methods, was one way that some of these gifted and talented participants chose to 'be in the world' of their school culture. Struggling with their feelings of difference, gifted and talented students can become very adept at adapting their performance and their behaviours so that they appear to be acting the same way as others in their peer group and thus they mask their developing identity as a gifted student (Gross, 1998). Eddles-Hirsch et al. (2012) reported that there are a variety of ways in which gifted students try to normalise their behaviours in order to fit in with their peer groups in school settings. Coping strategies that students used include playing the class clown, denying their giftedness and dropping out of any special programmes intended for highly able learners. These are strategies that students from this study also talked about.

In Pomerantz and Pomerantz's (2002) study of able underachievers a major theme was that the students felt that they needed to preserve their social identity as their

number one priority. Thus they were not going to risk social exclusion by admitting to their abilities and joining in with what they saw as the ostracised pupils – the able achievers who were stigmatised in their eyes as “ ‘squares,’ ‘geeks,’ ‘spoffs,’ ‘swots’ and ‘nerds’ ” (p. 36). Maintaining their status as a ‘normal’ adolescent in their school setting was of the utmost importance to participants in Pomerantz and Pomerantz’s study. As the authors concluded, “the possibility of achieving at a higher level and having a positive self-image and a bit of popularity as well sounds like a package that might need some selling ...” (p. 38). Similarly, striving for what they saw as normality seemed to be the aim for several of the students from this New Zealand study and to be a motivation for some of the code switching behaviours of students like Kurt. Others, like Bruce Wayne or Hubert Cumberland, seemed to have achieved the balance of achievement and a positive social profile quite comfortably.

Findings from my thesis research also align with Eddles-Hirsch et al. (2012) who note that “gender expectations have been shown to impact the type of coping strategy selected by the gifted child” (p. 53). For example, ideas expressed by the students in my study are consistent with ideas presented by both Monceaux and Jewell (2007) and Eddles-Hirsch et al. (2012) who perceived that sporting prowess, not academic ability, was seen by peers to be associated with a preferred male identity. Similarly, Renold (2001) stated that most girls wouldn’t admit to academic success or “being top” (p. 580). The tensions involved in “doing girl” and “doing clever” were discussed by Renold and Allan (2006) based around three narrative case studies, with the finding that “embodying excellence and achieving femininity involves a precarious balancing act” (p. 469). Macleod (2004) writes of the conflict gifted young girls experience as they reach puberty and gender-role socialisation messages become that they need to focus on their appearance and direct their attention towards boys and making oneself attractive. She notes that “it is a strong young woman who will strive for achievement and self-actualisation, rather than redirecting much of her energy and time into remaking herself to become attractive to the opposite sex” (p. 491). The observations that Autumn Ashes made about some of the girls in her class, the “bubbleheads,” backed up this premise. However, some of the girls in this study, like Autumn and April, appeared to be more resilient and more inclined to continue on an achievement pathway. In fact, some of the students from this study were developing an identity that was outside of the dominant discourse and in which the popularity part

of the equation did not seem to rank as an important one. It seemed that not every student sought normalisation.

Being ‘the other’

And at high school I guess you know it’s the fitting in, like the identity, you want to be like everybody else, and there’s a few that will rise out of that and it won’t worry them one way or the other whether they’re the ‘in’ crowd or the ‘out’ crowd.

(Parent of Autumn Ashes)

Some of the students talked of how they had accepted their status as being different – “I’m really, like, the weird one, outside the square” (Autumn Ashes) – and it was part of an identity with which they seemed comfortable, most of the time. They were beginning to actively cultivate an identity of difference for themselves. The process of ‘othering’ was not just one that was initiated by the people in their environment. It was obvious that some were still struggling with their identity journeys, but the more friendships they began to make with those who might also be seen as part of an ‘others’ group, the easier it became for them to edge towards an alternative place for them in the social world.

Lewis, for example, has some interesting quirky habits that might have led to some quite ribald heckling within a different school culture. He performed a fairly flamboyant “Gok goes Tudor” item that went on You Tube for all to see, dressed as a girl for the school show, and as his mother reports, “still makes his car noise” which is an unconscious habit. However, at the single sex boys’ school which he attends he has managed to be different, but accepted socially, as both creatively and academically talented. He does also take part in some sporting activities, which may have been an added advantage, although for Lewis this was not something he has done purposefully in order to be accepted in a peer group. He plays sport simply because he enjoys it. It is interesting to speculate how Lewis might fit into a school like Kurt’s. Would the more traditional male school culture have an effect or would Lewis’ particular interpersonal skills and self-confidence prevail?

Astrid, too, is described as understanding that “she’s odd” by her mother, who reports that Astrid struggled to find acceptance at an earlier age. However, she began to find

comfort with a group of similar peers at Skye Intermediate and now at her high school. For example, when Astrid was in her last year at primary school she had a habit of constantly acting out a scenario about ‘wiggly fish.’ She had created a world for herself in which she was a wiggly fish and invented wiggly fish dances which, perhaps understandably, was seen as being very peculiar by her peers at the small rural school which she attended. In the accelerated class at Skye, she found that others appreciated this imaginative exercise and several peers helped her to draw creatures for her wiggly fish world and participated in the dances with her. Her behaviour was more acceptable to these other creative students and she found a fit in the streamed class at Skye.

She’s quite eccentric from time to time. Um, and at Skye, I have to admit, in that class, all the children were the same, they were all quite musical, a little bit ... left of centre I suppose, just, yeah. And all appreciated each other’s eccentricities.

(Parent of Astrid)

Astrid is still moving among a group of creative peers and her mother says they all encourage each others’ “eccentricities” and “bounce off each other” or, as Astrid herself says, her friends are all “very individual.” While Astrid may be positioned as an ‘other,’ outside of the mainstream peer culture, it seems to be a secure place for her at the moment.

Marty displays eccentric, obsessive habits and has always done so. These habits worry his parents. At the time of the interviews, it was an obsession with cleaning his teeth and he was unable to go anywhere without a long process of doing this task.

He, you know, he can’t do anything until his teeth are cleaned and it’s, it’s – he’s trying to cut down the time, because I’ve been on top of him about it. It’s, you know, he can be half an hour sometimes cleaning his teeth and it impacts on the whole family, really.

(Parent of Marty)

However, like Lewis, Marty seems comfortable with his developing identity and is well liked by the friends he has made. He does not seem to be afraid to speak his mind on a variety of matters.

Socialisation can be more problematic for some of these able young people, as they begin to develop adolescent identities alongside some of these more peculiar practices that are not aligned with what could be seen as more normative adolescent behaviours. However, these ‘othering practices’ did not seem to concern some of these student participants unduly. These students had begun to embrace the identity of being ‘different’ or outside the norm of an adolescent peer group. Some like Astrid, and Autumn Ashes, whose story later in this chapter illustrates her ‘othering’ choices further, did so consciously, while for others it was because it had always felt comfortable for them to ‘be’ this way.

Some of the students in this study were not only positioned in this way by their peers but actively cultivated a status of difference for themselves, preferring to be part of a group that was seen as ‘weird’ or outside of the norm because this was, in essence, a group. If they were going to be placed in a position as an outsider, then they were going to embrace this position along with others and create their own ‘normal.’ Autumn’s comments about the “bubbleheads” shows how those in these ‘others’ groups can negatively portray their popular peers in an attempt to trivialise their behaviours: talking about foolish obsessions with boys and clothes from the popular girls, or the sporty boys as ‘dumb jocks.’ This is similar to Renold’s (2001) observations of other practices in which she says that “girls marginalised from popular positions often positioned other girls as marginal” (p. 582). April’s disparaging view of the girls who chatted in class, and were disrespectful of the need to complete work in a top stream class, is another example of locating herself within her group of academic achievers and negatively positioning the popular group from which she was excluded.

Students like Lewis and Marty didn’t appear to see the need to change their behaviours, to code switch, in order to fit in with what might be the more popular groups in their school. They could be said to be positioned as part of an ‘others’ group by their peers, in that they were not part of the mainstream ‘cool’ social group within their school social hierarchy, but neither felt the need to engage in “role experimentation – selecting aspects of oneself which one will develop (usually those aspects which are deemed acceptable by the peer culture)” (Gross, 1998, p. 168). In fact, it may never have crossed their minds at all. Even though they were both able to

analyse their own behaviours and felt that at times these needed moderating, they seemed content with their socialisation experiences at the time of interviewing. These boys did not display the same angst over identity issues as someone like Kurt.

Differing personalities, coupled with previous schooling experiences, seemed to impact on the developing identities for these students. For some, being an ‘other’ was an acceptable pathway, while for some there seems to be internal pressure to develop an identity that aligns more closely with that of others in the mainstream peer group, and thus avoid the embarrassment of becoming a social isolate. However, for gifted and talented students in New Zealand, it can be the identities that are placed upon them by people in society that can cause the most angst. The data showed that by far the most common of these ‘othering’ identities is that of the nerd.

“Nerd alert, nerd alert!”: The nerd as an ‘other.’

The overwhelming positioning that others used to describe gifted and talented, bright, or smart students in New Zealand schools was constructed around the discourse of ‘the nerd.’ This was the ‘fit’ that others attributed to academically gifted students. The students, parents and teachers reported many incidents of this term being used in reference to academically able students, nearly always in a derogatory context. It was a term that was used frequently by the students, and repeated often enough by the parents and the teachers that it seems almost to be accepted as part of the New Zealand vernacular. Nerds were definitely positioned as ‘others’ by their mainstream peers, according to these participants.

Top stream classes are identified as “nerds’ classes” it would seem, by those who are not in them.

... and what Bruce Wayne appeared to indicate is that he is seen as being in a brighter class, in a top-band class, so therefore that’s the nerds. Um, he himself said no, A is nerdier [laughs] than we are. And so yes, it’s a derogatory term isn’t it.
(Parent of Bruce Wayne)

So [laughs], but other people, like, sort of respect us, but then say, like, “the nerdy class” even though it’s not necessarily a negative thing, they’re just sort of putting us in a box saying, “Oh she’s really,

really smart” you know.
(April)

Some students were obviously not comfortable with the nomenclature of ‘nerd’ and tried to avoid being seen as one. They didn’t feel that being dubbed a nerd was conducive to peer acceptance; it was an ‘othering’ label, a label of difference. Some even considered the use of the term as a form of bullying: “There’s always going to be people, like, calling someone else a nerd but it’s not, like, in a really bad form of bullying, so it’s not bullying, so it’s not bad enough that the teachers or the principal’s going to approach you” (Hubert Cumberland).

Mr Bubbles was concerned about “getting that nerdy name” when he was placed in the streamed class, as his mother reported:

He’s in a nerds class now, he told us, even though he talks about, you know, I’m in the nerd’s class, the nerds, and, and possibly is a little bit embarrassed about seeing himself as a nerd.
(Parent of Mr Bubbles)

He was reluctant to be seen to be associated with what he himself called the “nerds,” the ones “who sit in at morning tea time and play on their calculators.” He initially had difficulty adjusting to his status as a bright student in an accelerated class until he recognised that there were a mix of boys within the class and several were also ‘sporty’ in the same way he saw himself.

The students were aware of the stereotypes of the nerdish student and some spoke up strongly against this labelling. Lewis thought it was “quite weird” that people saw smart students as “nerds” and Hubert Cumberland talked about the tendency her peers had of labelling Asian students as nerds. She was appalled by this: “And if you got, like, if you got to know one of them, then you might not think of them as just, like, an outcast nerd.” She also referred to media representations of bright students:

Yeah and there’s also a stereotype on people that are smart. Like, there’s that name of like being nerdy and, like, at the movies it shows like nerds with, like, you know, glasses and high riding [wearing trousers high up around the waist] and all that sort of thing.
(Hubert Cumberland)

Others talked about the stereotypical nerd, the “classical geeky/nerd thing” (Kurt) in terms of physicality and image. The stronger boys at his school were unlikely to be labelled nerds. Nor were those who were not sporty but good at music of the “poppy, rocky sort,” whereas classically-musically talented boys were “nerdy.”

Most of the students could recall situations of being labelled a nerd or a similar term by peers at some time in their schooling experience. Mr Bubbles relates how his friends would call out “Nerd alert, nerd alert!” when he approached. Autumn was called a ‘nerd’ and a ‘walking dictionary’ throughout her primary school days. Rambo told of one specific incident he remembered.

In Science one of my friends accused me of being a nerd because I know the Periodic Table up to 30, but my Science teacher said it’s only nerdy if you know it all, jokingly I think?
(Rambo, Reflection Sheet)

The coping strategy that most of these students from this study reported they used was to “laugh it off.” Several appeared to be able to deflect the teasing away from themselves with wry comments or humour. Being around like-minded peers was a support for some of the more sensitive students, who in the past, had found such derogatory comments difficult to deal with.

And I think if someone does call her a nerd these days, she’s able just to laugh it off, because she knows, whatever that word actually means, that she’s not, because you know she has a lovely group of friends and they’re all quite academic achieving and that as well.
(Parent of April)

Others, like April, appeared to find it easier to deal with the teasing as they got older and began to find more confidence in their developing identities as able students. Being called a ‘nerd’ signalled you out as being different, which was not a preferred option for most of these adolescents, but a growing awareness of one’s individuality plus, conversely, finding a group that did fit with this particular identity, lessened the impact of taunts from peers. Rambo’s parent believes this is the case for Rambo.

I think especially at the age perhaps where Rambo’s at, and maybe was at last year – although he’s becoming more confident now – is that he doesn’t want to be too different from the others or perhaps if

he does something or is interested in something, people might think he's, tease him about it or "That's a bit nerdy" or something like that. But I think now he's sort of starting to you know get a bit more confidence in himself that it's okay to just be you, and you know, you do the best of your abilities.

The 'sporty' students, such as Hubert Cumberland and Bruce Wayne, reported that they had never been called nerds or anything similar. Again, this seemed to reinforce the understanding of these participants that if you were both academically gifted and more of an all-rounder, and in particular an adolescent with sporting ability in the New Zealand school culture, you were less likely to be positioned as an outsider in the social environment and thus a target for disparaging comments.

Research supports the findings that students who are perceived as nerds are often those who are constantly harassed at school by their peers (Glaeser, 2003; Monceaux & Jewell, 2007). Efforts to avoid the nerd label can lead to code switching and to a dumbing down from bright students (Neihart, 2006; Pomerantz & Pomerantz, 2002). Eddles-Hirsch (2009) refers to "the dreaded 'nerd' tag" prevalent in Australian schools (p. 264). The academically gifted boys in her study played sports in an attempt to avoid being tagged with this label. Adolescent boys in Monceaux and Jewell's (2007) study were asked which group of students were bullied the most at school. Eighty percent responded that nerds were the most bullied group in their view with 'fat' students being the next most harassed (15%). Miller (2011) notes that stereotypical media representations are of gifted boys as "inept geeks and nerds who are objects of ridicule" (p. 360), and he links this to a risk that some might develop anti-social or even violent behaviour as a response.

In contrast to those who actively avoided being associated with the nerd label, some students from the study, including Autumn Ashes, embraced the nerd identity as an adolescent. This seemed to be in line with an acceptance of being the 'other' because of the group advantages this entailed, as has been discussed. Being part of the 'nerd's class' was not so bad because there were plenty of others who were part of that particular group too.

Nerd. But I actually don't mind being called a nerd because nerds are very cool. Like being uncool is amazing and cool in my world anyway and yeah. Kind of being, well, being, I'm – at Mull, we're kind of

classed as the music geeks, kind of, we're in a music class, we're all supposedly socialised with our own kind.
(Autumn Ashes)

This was interesting in the case of Autumn as she had experienced some unhappy times in her primary school years (see Autumn's story below) in which she was positioned as an outsider. However, in her adolescent stage she was standing out against the nerd identity as an unpopular discourse. She, and to a certain extent Astrid, who was involved in a similar "music geek" group (and perhaps unconsciously, Lewis) were reclaiming the nerd identity and reconstructing it as a positive discourse that could be "very cool." It seemed that they felt that if their peers were going to place them in this position of an outside group, then they would turn this around and proclaim their own group as something special. It was perhaps their way of taking the power back and rebelling against social rejection. Their way of fitting in was to actively 'be the other'; to accept and celebrate the nerd as an 'other.'

Most of the students from this study did not choose the 'nerd' identity willingly, although it would seem that some had been, and continued to be, affected by the construction of this discourse that was put upon them by others. However, some were keen to stand up against the stereotypes that they saw an identity such as a 'nerd' or the 'weird one' represented and although they may not accept the 'nerd' nomenclature, they were becoming more confident in embracing their difference with the support of others like them. A few went further and aligned themselves with a 'weird group,' often called 'nerds,' reframing the term as a positive discourse in resistance to the more established assumption that 'nerd' was a derogatory label. This reframing of the nerd as a positive identity is discussed further in Chapter Six.

The story of Autumn Ashes, whom the reader was introduced to at the beginning of this thesis, concludes this section. She is a young gifted and talented girl who was not only positioned as an 'other' by both her peers and adults, but who begins to choose that position for herself as she works to find a 'fit' for herself in the world of school.

Autumn's story

Autumn Ashes is a vivacious, energetic young girl – "I'm really loud" – who is full of enthusiasm for her areas of interest. She loves all kinds of dance but

is a non-sporty person and as her mother says, “that’s been a bit of an issue because, you know, ‘run, Autumn, run’ is like saying ‘fly to the moon, Autumn, fly.’”

She began her schooling years at the local rural school where she had some less than positive experiences as a bright student. The early years saw the primary school recognising her abilities and providing some extension programmes for Autumn and others. However, from Year 4 onwards, Autumn remembers that “I didn’t get on that well with some of the teachers because I tried, sometimes I tried to be better than the teachers. The teachers would think they knew something and I’d go ‘but no, this is the case.’ And they would not like me for it.” Even though Autumn “came top all the time” it didn’t feel satisfying for her as she felt that she wasn’t doing her best and that “top wasn’t really top for me.” She thought she could always do better. Over time she began to try less and ceased to respond in class.

I felt like, after a while, when the teachers kind of didn’t like me kind of maybe, like, if they were explaining something to the class, I probably like, used to kind of chirp up and say something else and help explain it and they didn’t like that and so I kind of ... shrunk back down into my little ... spot and just kind of listened and took note and really didn’t try and get my say out that much with it, like, stuff.

Her mother felt that she was “in the mire of mediocrity.” It was at this stage of her schooling years that her mother reports that “we started to have our problems with bullying.” The excerpts below are reflections from Autumn’s mother and from Autumn Ashes herself on the incidents of bullying that Autumn suffered as a direct result of being positioned as a bright student at her primary school.

Autumn Ashes’ mother:

So Autumn made this lovely board game and it had a whole lot of dancing things and French terms and that sort of thing. And then she swapped it all round the room for others to play. Well, the group of boys that got given hers just ripped it to shreds ... Of course, from then on, you know, they used to just call her “the walking dictionary” and, you know, “you’re a nerd” and all those sorts of things. Even at sort of eight / nine. And then she had this one little boy who just thought Autumn was a really good victim. Cos she had, in those days she didn’t stand up for herself all that much. She just sort of shrunk back a little bit. Um, and she told him that she didn’t like it and things but nothing she tried seemed to work so she got to the point where she would go to the library and help, if she could,

in her lunchtime or wander around and find some other teacher that needed her help, shall I say. She didn't want to be in the playground. She said, "I'm scared. I've tried and I really hate it when, you know, J hurts me in the playground or he tries to hurt my sister" ... The final crunch came when he actually wrote her a note in blood. He said 'I will kill you, Autumn.' And I, that's when I actually took it to the principal and said enough's enough. Now she was scared witless ... So that was sort of that year and she was wearing glasses and then one day she came back after lunch and her glasses were in the desk in her case and she had got them out to put them on and somebody had snapped them in two.

Her self-esteem started to really plummet, I think, about Year four and ... just everybody was on her back about something in the classroom. She had decided she wasn't going to show anybody what she could actually do, um, because they made fun of her if she did. So she just sailed along in the middle of the road ... Just did the bare minimum to get by, really. And she'd just given up by then, basically. And the shoulders sort of started to droop and every day the school bag came home and they were sort of sinking lower and lower and lower.

Autumn Ashes:

I hated [the primary school], I really hated just the school, the teachers, the – particularly the people there. I really did not like them.

Well I do remember that we used to have, you know, little homework passes and if you got ... like maybe one, two mistakes in a spelling test or whatever for a whole term, you could have a week off homework and I was often getting a couple of homework passes, and I suppose they were maybe jealous that I could do that and they couldn't. And so they picked on me.

I know that I was majorly bullied from about Year Three to like ... Year Six, particularly by this one person ... He, I, I haven't seen him in years but I remember, I saw him in Year Eight, I was sitting at a bus stop and he walked past, and something came over me and I just sat back into the bus stop and just made myself invisible. It was really weird, like the Year Eight me would have kind of stood up to him if he'd tried to be mean to me, but I just kind of shrunk away ... I'm pretty sure I was still scared of him when I saw him again kind of thing.

We got a relieving teacher and everything just turned to custard and I got majorly picked on. I remember, um, some other teacher had organised us to do a little recorder thing, and I was doing an extra part or something and then the day of the thing ... I tried to go into the classroom at lunchtime to practise, and a girl who'd always hated me because I was smart and better than her at things, like music, um, she actually slammed my finger in the door, when I tried to come in, and it was really hard to play the recorder at the concert and I was really, really annoyed. Yeah. It, it's – and I will never forget the names of those people. I think when I'm you know, 60, 90, I will still be able to say that I – M C hated me at primary school. J D bullied me at primary school, I'd still be able to say the names. Like they're just names you never forget. My mum forgot his name and I haven't, it kind of sticks.

Autumn's parents moved her to Skye following these disturbing experiences and things began to improve for her. She fitted in much better in the streamed class at Skye where her mother reports, "she blossomed. And she was actually in a class with kids who were just like her. You know, a little bit crazy and a little bit eccentric and all their really special interests and those children sort of gel." The closeness of the class at Skye made a huge difference to Autumn's sense of self-concept and she began to gain confidence in who she was and to accept and value her status as a bright student.

Well we all got called nerds at Skye, we were Room 19 nerds, but it didn't worry us, we were all nerds together, I suppose you could say. And then the thing I loved about Skye, was I found people that were smarter than me. At primary school there, well there was a couple of people maybe who were like, you know, but they just – it seemed to bother me that I came top in lots of things, ah, most things, and then, like, at Skye there were people smarter than me and it was great, cos I was with all the smart people together kind of thing, like all of us working together, instead of one particular person being picked on.

The Autumn at high school is developing into a stronger character who stands up for herself and her friends. She is confident in her socialisation abilities and this is quite a change from her primary school days. "I had less friends, definitely, way less friends. I didn't go out and meet people and like just walk up to someone at school and be like, "hi, how's your day, I'm Autumn," kind of thing," which is the kind of action she says she would take now. Currently, she describes herself by saying, "I'm good at being able to talk and talk and talk. I'm pretty good at socialising." The crux of Autumn's developing

identities seems to be her embracing of the 'other' role in the social grouping of mainstream adolescence. Her mother describes her daughter thus:

But, um, you know she doesn't really fit in and, you know – as in, but she doesn't want to fit in. You know, she's quite happy the way she is. You know, she's happy in her track pants and her thermal top and, you know, she doesn't mind that she doesn't have all the – I think some of her friends despair of her that she doesn't like shopping, yeah.

Autumn herself talks about how fitting in for her has evolved and shows how peer acceptance within this particular group has led to a sense of community that is working for a young girl who was once socially stigmatised in a different school environment.

Like – but I try not to care what others think because I've always kind of been the weird kid, but now I fit in with all the other weird kids. M calls us the misfits, it's like our little friendship group where all the – you know, we've got the little wee nerdy Doctor Who fans and we've got all the little guys and their Rubik's Cubes and we've got people with weird interests in things like Shakespeare – we're all similar in little ways and we all have, you know, like some of us have got similar music taste and stuff. But M calls us the misfits just because we're all so weird, like, we're all – managed to become this big, like, community of little weird kids.

Autumn intends to succeed academically: "So if I get four or five Excellences or whatever – cos I don't feel I'll get that many but I'm going to be so disappointed in myself if I don't get one in German and English, that sort of thing, like that would just be a real downer." She is aiming to be selected for an exchange to Germany and would like to pursue a career as a journalist. Socially, at this stage of her schooling experience, Autumn is contented 'being' in her distinct idiosyncratic community, "it's kind of just a little group of us and – because it's kind of the people I fit in with," within the larger world of her particular school milieu. Autumn is positioned as an 'other'; in this case, by the mainstream adolescent peer group at the very large co-educational high school which she attends. However, because she has aligned with friends who have similar interests and who have formed their own group, she does not feel the need to code switch to the larger, more popular group and in fact relishes her difference.

Autumn's story is about a young gifted and talented girl who despite earlier unhappy schooling experiences, is constructing identities around being proud of her difference. She challenges the popular discourse of what it means to be 'the adolescent girl' within the socio-cultural milieu of her school. She

continues to work towards being the high achiever within the security of her 'others' group.

Markus and Nurius (1986) conceived the idea of 'possible selves' which are a combination of an individual's hopes of what they might become and what they would like to become. It is how people think about their potential and their future. Autumn has created possible selves that reflect her circumstances and the social situation in which she has placed herself. Her developing selves at this stage of her adolescence reflect those of difference, of the creative, musical, performing, mildly rebellious, unique individual comfortable with her image but still holding on to some of the norms of adolescents' behaviour such as her attachments to social media. Her future aims include academic success, as well as life experiences based around travel and living overseas. She appears to have survived the trauma of her primary school years. Achievement in school, at least in her areas of interest, is very much a part of her possible future self.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter has been to present the participants' understandings around the phenomenological question of what it is like to be a gifted and talented adolescent in the cultural environment of a New Zealand school. Such ways of being are critical to the understandings that these students begin to construct about the phenomena of achievement or underachievement; it is their experiences of being in the world of school as gifted and talented learners that influence these understandings.

The implicit views of the students (and their parents) on what it means to be gifted and talented were couched in terms of understatement – of being just above average, rather than any focus on exceptionality. These participants were cognisant of the broad social values in New Zealand society which prefer that one downplays any talents that one may possess. However, all these young people still saw themselves as 'being the high achiever' in the future. Despite understanding that the high expectations that they and others held for themselves could lead to stress, these students continued to set high achievement goals.

Being in the world of school, for these students, was about the challenges and tensions that arose for them as they looked to find a 'fit' in the particular school milieu in which they found themselves. The process of continually developing their identities as social beings was a focus for these young people. This diverse group of young gifted and talented students represent a variety of responses to the forced choice dilemma they all face as they begin to discover what it is like for them 'being in the world of school.' There are those who are developing identities that are shaped by being able to more naturally 'fit' in the social world of adolescence with little effort and there are those who resort to code switching in order to find that 'fit,' and in an effort to conform to social and gender stereotypes. There are those who are choosing to accept being the 'other' with the support of friends. As each of these young people develops their adolescent identities, they make decisions about their achievement pathways at school. The stories in this chapter are intended to act as rich descriptions of the deeply personal identity negotiations that are taking place for these gifted and talented adolescents.

The final findings chapter discusses the essence of the co-constructed meanings that have arisen from analysing the data from this phenomenological study.

Chapter Six:

Reflections and Theorising.

The Essences of the Lived Experiences

Oh, it's made me analyse myself a bit more ... made me think about myself in a different way, and it's, you learn more about yourself when someone asks you questions that you never would be expecting.
(Kurt)

Introduction

In Chapters Four and Five I outlined textural and structural descriptions around the main findings from this thesis. Van Manen's (1990) description of a phenomenological study (see Chapter Two) recommends that the researcher reflect on the essences of the real lived experiences through major themes and then describe the phenomenon by interpretations expressed through writing. In this third Findings chapter I reflect on the essences of participants' understandings by drawing the findings together through three themes or 'big ideas' that are inter-connected, into a rich composite description that helps to provide insight into the research questions posed for this study. This is the final step in Moustakas's (1994) process of analysis (Chapter Three). The composite description presented was also clarified for me through the process of writing about the themes; the act of writing contributed to the interpretive analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005).

Further, as I discuss notions of socio-cultural context, of the enigma of potential and of the complexities of adolescent identities, I am cognisant of the fact that this theorising is based on an interpretative analysis of the perspectives of one group of gifted and talented adolescents, their parents and teachers. This is a small subset of the many perspectives and stories that could be drawn from the diverse population that is gifted and talented adolescents experiencing schooling in New Zealand. A phenomenological research approach aims to focus on the uniqueness of human experience. I do not seek to generalise to all gifted and talented students, their parents and their teachers, but rather to suggest some broad themes that might allow a reader to draw connections between the context of this research and their own experiences.

To this extent, I am aware that any theorising exists at a micro-level, in that it relates “to particular phenomena, behaviours, or interactions in specific settings” (Mutch, 2005, p. 71), but with the potential to draw implications relevant to other similar contexts or settings.

Several Propositions that emerge from each of the three themes are included at the conclusion of this chapter as a way of summarising the essences of participants’ understandings of achievement and experiences of being gifted and talented.

Culture and context matter

But I think that’s just a New Zealand thing, they don’t talk about it, they don’t like to ... (Hubert Cumberland’s parent)

The beliefs espoused by the participants from this study can be seen and understood to be developed within a New Zealand cultural milieu and to contradict some of the prevailing discourses that exist in both the international literature and wider New Zealand society. Moreover, the socio-cultural context of schools impacted on the understandings that the students had about what achievement meant, about how they constructed implicit views of giftedness and talent and how they chose to position themselves as learners within the environment of school.

Recognised values within a New Zealand context

Effort

The findings from this study showed that a particular New Zealand socio-cultural context influenced students, parents’ and teachers’ beliefs about the phenomenon of achievement. Rather than reflecting the international literature reports that many gifted children understand high achievement to be about having innate abilities (Rimm, 2006; Siegle, 2013; Siegle & McCoach, 2005), the students in this PhD research recognised a role for both ability and effort in their construction of the phenomenon of achievement. The prevailing discursive belief that those from a Western culture see natural ability as being at the crux of high achievement is not supported by the understandings of the participants in this study. This predominant

belief is premised around a compensatory view of effort and ability, which holds that gifted students don't have to work hard to achieve and if students do need to work hard they are not as bright as they thought they were (Siegle & McCoach, 2005). Knowing that you are smart, or being told that you are smart, was not, in the view of these participants, enough to ensure the kind of success these adolescents saw for their future possible selves. These able students understood that effort was required for achievement. In this, they were reflecting and concurring with the views of both their parents and teachers.

It could be anticipated that parents and teachers would hold a socially constructed view that effort was important for achievement for all students as they move through school, reflecting recognised New Zealand cultural values. Many parents would encourage their children to work hard, to put in the effort in order to be the best they can, whether gifted and talented or not. However, it could also be posited that adolescents would find the idea that high achievement is more about hard work, as less appealing than the notion that innate ability is the key to success. Nevertheless, according to the participants in this study (as discussed in Chapters Four and Five) the essence of achievement for gifted and talented students is doing the best you are capable of by putting in the effort required. These students equated achievement with a greater sense of accomplishment if it had required effort, and not just relied on innate ability.

The acknowledgement by highly able young learners that true achievement did not come about merely by being 'smart' is in contrast to the broader societal view, in the New Zealand context, that gifted students have it easy and will thus always achieve success without having to work hard. It could be interpreted that these students saw that being a high achiever was more acceptable within their school socio-cultural milieu if it was acknowledged that effort had been part of the equation. It was not desirable to have things too easy while others struggled, as this could be seen as putting oneself above others, something that these participants seemed to have learned is not acceptable in New Zealand society.

The participants' opinions may be explained in part by Dweck's theory of incremental intelligence (Dweck, 2006; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Dweck maintains that an entity theory of intelligence is about a belief that ability is fixed and effort does not play a

part, what she terms a fixed mindset, while a student who has a growth mindset is operating under an incremental theory of intelligence which premises a malleable intelligence that will increase if more effort is applied. The students from this study reflected a growth mindset in their understandings of achievement, which I suggest fits with the collective social norms that they understand exist in wider New Zealand society and which are reflected in the micro environment of school. The findings from this study show that there is a wider social context to Dweck's theory for gifted and talented students than the individualistic view that she espouses. Understandings about achievement for gifted learners are influenced by societal values and beliefs, as evidenced by the data from these New Zealand students, which shows that effort is an admired societal value. This socially recognised value supports a growth mindset for individual gifted and talented students.

It has been difficult to compare these findings with those of other empirically based studies within a New Zealand context as none were found that specifically explored the understandings about achievement from the perspective of the gifted and talented students themselves. However, Austin and Hastwell (2010) asked top achieving Year 13 students from Australia and New Zealand about their tips for success in their final years at school. These students admitted that "good marks came naturally" but all said that working hard was required for success as well. As one student quoted in the book remarked, "Even the smartest person in the country would have to work hard to gain a top mark, I reckon" (p. 14).

Thus, the young people interviewed for Austin and Hastwell's book, who were experiencing success at this level of school, were not seeing achievement as something that was easily gained through being 'blessed' with innate high ability, the 'luck' discourse. Rather, they were reflecting the broader cultural values about achievement and effort that they had been exposed to in their societal milieu and aligning with the recognised values of the participants in this study.

Popular understandings about achievement for highly able learners (as expressed in recent magazine articles) reflect different cultural values around what it means to achieve for highly able learners (see Chapter Two). Nearly all the parents in this study talked about the responsibility that they felt around giving the message to their children that even though they had high ability, the relationship between effort and

achievement was important. They wanted their children to appreciate that although having high ability was an advantage, it was important to cultivate traits such as hard work and persistence in order to reach success in any area. That their ideas resonated with ideas expressed by educational researchers (for example, Hattie, in Laugeson, 2011) could be seen to be demonstrating a shared New Zealand value. Yet there still remains a prevailing view reinforced by the popular culture (Anyan, 2012; Chisholm, 2010; Laugeson, 2011) that parents of gifted and talented students in New Zealand expect high achievement based on ability alone. This study challenges these ideas and suggests that it may be an over-simplification to assume that parents in a New Zealand context focus on ability over effort. Also, given the uniqueness of New Zealand values it is inappropriate to assume beliefs and attitudes for New Zealand students, parents and teachers based on literature and research that is predominantly conducted in an American cultural environment. Understandings about achievement from the parents in this study involved a more complex blend of ideas and cultural influence.

It is acknowledged that without data which explores the understandings of Asian students in New Zealand schools it is not possible to predict whether or not Asian students in New Zealand, or their parents, would have similar understandings about achievement to those reported in the literature or by authors such as Chua (see Paul, 2011). However, this thesis research suggests that culture is significant. Differences in understanding between different cultural groups, and socio-cultural issues for gifted and talented students from different cultural backgrounds, is a line for further possible research (see Chapter Seven).

Well-being

A second powerful understanding emerged from the parents' understandings about achievement, that could be seen to be influenced by the culture and context of the society in which their children were experiencing schooling. This was constructed around another recognised value within a New Zealand context, that of the broad concept of well-being. This concept seemed to be interpreted by these parents in two ways: on one hand, in relation to personal happiness, and on the other to a desire to contribute positively as citizens to one's society, encompassing the values of social responsibility.

Much of the literature on achievement for gifted and talented students focuses on achievement in an academic sense, such as receiving high scores in tests, attaining top yearly grades or mastering the school curriculum (as outlined in Chapter Two). Silverman (1993) notes that there is also a realm of literature that “paints an unattractive picture” (p. 172) around parents of gifted children, suggesting that parents manipulate their bright children forward for their own ego, encourage their children to think they are superior and antagonise educators with their demands. Perhaps this is why reports in New Zealand media articles (Anyan, 2012; Laugesen, 2011) have reflected misconceptions among some in both the education sector and the wider community in this country, that many parents of gifted and talented students ‘push’ their children to achieve at the highest levels academically to the detriment of any other pursuits and at the possible expense of successful socialisation with their peers or a normal integration into societal life. The findings from my study showed that this was not the rule for these New Zealand parents. It could be argued that such misconceptions are based on literature that is grounded in a cultural context that is not that of New Zealand (Campbell & Verna, 2007; Colangelo et al., 1993; Peterson & Colangelo, 1996).

The concept of achievement that the parents from this study saw as being most desired for New Zealand gifted and talented students, was well-rounded achievement. Parents wanted their children to do well academically but they did not see this as being the only path to achievement. They were also keen for the adolescents to develop into what they saw as “good, rounded, young people” (Parent of Lewis). Success, to the extent that everything else went by the board, did not seem to be the goal as much as this ‘all-rounded’ young human being, who was a useful member of society using his or her talents wisely and being happy while doing so, thus encompassing this broader concept of well-being (for more discussion on the ‘all-rounder’ see the Identities theme in this chapter). This focus on achievement as well-being could viably be interpreted as a reflection of a more ‘laid back’ (easy going and relaxed) New Zealand cultural ethos, as opposed to a more cut throat competitive model from some other cultures. Similarly, although many of the teachers did take a performance view of achievement in line with their positions as professionals, some shared the parents’ views that achievement should be about more than high results (as outlined in Chapter Four).

The parents in this study saw achievement and happiness as being inextricably linked. The aspect of well-being that was most sought after was the personal happiness of their own children. Delisle (2006) makes the point that one of the greatest worries that any parent has for their child, is that he or she will be “lonely, friendless, and isolated from the social milieu” (p. 27). This concern was echoed in the responses from these parent participants. Sometimes a successful friendship was seen as the greatest achievement from a parental viewpoint. As Autumn Ashes’ parent said “we all want them to achieve, but we want them to be happy more.” When considering the individual and personal well-being of their own child it seems that the two concepts – achievement and happiness – are intimately tied together in the minds of these parents. These recognised values around well-being could be seen as leading to tensions for parents of gifted and talented students. They need to try to find ways of encouraging their highly able children to succeed academically at school, but not at the expense of their children’s positive adolescent social relationships, or of them “being happy.”

It seems that the stereotypical view predominant in New Zealand’s wider society, one possibly reinforced by the adoption of ideas from outside of this socio-cultural milieu, is still that many parents of gifted and talented adolescents see achievement as being about high grades in school (evidenced by the ideas from the popular literature discussed in Chapter Two). This is not borne out by either the empirical literature or the findings from this study. A broader understanding of achievement for gifted and talented students, premised on the notion of well-being, is preferred by these parent participants (and teachers).

Egalitarianism and anti-intellectualism

The findings from this phenomenological study revealed that the implicit understandings about giftedness, held by the participants, were strongly influenced by their socio-cultural environment. Their understandings are couched within the broader socio-cultural norms of the society in which they are living and specific schooling contexts. Thus, the findings showed that students and parents held to a strong belief in egalitarianism, as pertaining to fairness of opportunity for all, without advantage. This egalitarian understanding was reflected in both the students’ and the parents’ responses to the definition of giftedness and talent in the New Zealand cultural milieu.

Further, their understandings were in line with the views expressed in the New Zealand based literature of a broad New Zealand conceptualisation of giftedness and talent, outlined in Chapter Two. Giftedness and talent was “that notch above average,” “above the standard” or “beyond above average.” They did not align the concept with a specific focus on exceptionality and they avoided the spectre of elitism.

For the students in this study, there is an awareness of the recognised cultural value of egalitarianism that permeates their schools and that they need to downplay being ‘smart’ within the context of ‘being in the world of school’ if they want to maintain any kind of group social status. Given the construction of giftedness and talent that the participants saw as appropriate within their socio-cultural milieu described above, it is not surprising that these students are reticent in declaring themselves as gifted and talented, although they do understand that they have abilities that are above those of many of their peers. However, they would prefer not to be acknowledged in this way publicly by others. If the accepted definition of giftedness in the society within which they are living is carefully termed to avoid any tinge of elitism or boasting then it is no wonder that these young people avoid a label that would put them out of sync with their school peers. As Cross (2001) maintains, “our schools have increasingly become a setting where all of society’s values interact” (p. 43).

The prevailing belief of egalitarianism within our schools’ cultural milieu is recognised by social commentators as well as academics and researchers. Such values are entrenched from early schooling experiences as McLeod, a New Zealand media commentator, observes in *The Press* newspaper:

Primary schools I've known have praised children lavishly for being "good helpers" or "making good progress" – but never handed out accolades for academic achievement. The child who excelled at maths passed unnoticed by their peers. The child who produced outstanding art at home would be delegated to a group project where no individual could shine, and lost interest. A teacher once told me that all children are talented, and right there is where we have a problem with teaching philosophy in state schools. That we are all equal is a lie, however much we may want to believe it. We are all different, and some of us are cleverer than others. That much should be obvious. (2012, p. 12)

In the individual interviews, the students from this study would not admit to being exceptionally able. They appeared to be well versed in what they see as the required

socio-cultural rhetoric, or as Kurt says, “you learn, like, the society we live in sort of says to people, keep, try and make everyone feel the same.” Although some of these young people did express resistance against this prevailing discourse of egalitarianism, they were also maintaining it by framing their conceptions of giftedness and talent as “a notch above average” and avoiding notions of exceptionality. For example, they admitted it was hard to say they were good at something in case they were seen as being “up themselves.”

The notion that gifted and talented adolescents feel that giftedness, and academic giftedness in particular, is viewed in negative contexts by their peers and that the concept is negatively stigmatised, crosses international boundaries. Other studies have found similar results (Cross et al., 2003; Knudson, 2006; Monceaux & Jewell, 2007; Perrone, Wright, Ksiazak, Crane, & Vannatter, 2010; Renold & Allan, 2006). Neihart (2006) notes that bright students can “actually be punished by other kids for being ‘smart’ ” (p. 196). Pomerantz and Pomerantz’s (2002) study of able underachievers in Britain found similar concerns from the students they interviewed. The British participants were happy enough to call themselves above average in intelligence (in common with terms used by this study’s participants, such as “higher than average people”) but would not acknowledge that they were ‘clever,’ for fear of being seen as ‘teacher’s pets’ and becoming less popular with other pupils.

At the same time, it is acknowledged that individuals’ experiences can be different in particular school contexts (for example, the experiences for participants in a single sex boys’ high school and those in a large co-educational school). Within a New Zealand context, Knudson’s (2006) research on New Zealand adults who attended school in the 1960s found that during their primary school years the participants were not aware of any social difficulties related to being gifted and talented. In fact, Knudson’s participants did not realise that they possessed special academic abilities in comparison to age-related peers. This is unlike the experiences recounted by several students in my study, including Autumn Ashes. However, two factors could account for this. One was that, at the time, Knudson’s students were grouped with other highly able students in a streamed class at primary school and secondly, as Knudson reports:

...parents of other children at [the school] had been critical of the decision to establish what became regarded as the privileged class, and

... the parents of the able children had been careful to prevent the community criticism from reaching their sons and daughters. This observation afforded an interesting insight into the effects of the New Zealand egalitarian ethos of gifted children in the late 1960s. (p. 150)

Knudson's participants began to recognise that being academically able was not socially admired when they reached the secondary level, and they reported that they altered their behaviours to allow for this realisation. As one participant noted, by the time of high school, they knew "it was not cool to do the study thing" (p. 155). This view of themselves as being average in ability, when gifted and talented students were experiencing schooling within a streamed context, was supported by the perceptions of the participants in Keen's (2005) study. The gifted and talented students in his *Tracking Talent* study, who had experienced most of their schooling grouped with peers of similar attainment levels, perceived that they were of average ability. Townsend and Kirby (2005) asked a group of pre-adolescent gifted students from New Zealand about some of the stresses of being gifted. Responses showed a major theme was the difficulties they experienced in being accepted socially by classmates. One young girl from their study commented, "People looking at me and thinking wow, she's weird, she's gifted, ooh, she must be strange" (Stress, happiness and reaching potential; para 1).

Parents, too, were reluctant to publicise their own child's abilities and few were comfortable with the gifted and talented term. They were very aware of the middle class discourse of the 'pushy parent' and were eager to avoid this nomenclature. This current New Zealand-based thesis research shows that there has been little change in the egalitarian culture that has dominated New Zealand attitudes. For example, Knudson's (2006) retrospective study included interviews with the participants' parents. He found that the parents of the gifted and talented New Zealand students of the 1960s were just as likely to "understate rather than overestimate their child's ability" (p. 148). Similarly, Margrain's (2005) study of precocious readers found this was the cultural norm for the parents of the children she interviewed. None of the parents wanted their children to be "pushed" and they were all against the idea of "hothousing" their gifted young children (p. 222). Bevan-Brown (2004) feels that these ideas are particularly pertinent for Maori parents who may feel the tension of being considered as whakahihi or boastful among one's whanau and thus many could

be reluctant to nominate their own children as exceptional in any area. In Riley et al's (2004) research report to the New Zealand Ministry of Education the researchers noted that, in terms of parents in New Zealand identifying their children as gifted, "overestimation of abilities is uncommon. Sometimes parents will do the opposite and underestimate, perhaps not even understand their child's special abilities" (p. 29).

In fact, this inclination towards modesty in the public reporting of one's own child's achievements could be seen as a long held socio-cultural tradition in a New Zealand that is wary of the 'kiwi clobbering machine' or the 'Tall Poppy Syndrome' which have impacted none too positively on the talent in our culture (Moltzen, 2011b), and it could be argued that this could lead to some choosing mediocrity rather than striving for excellence in one's talent area. This concern around able students opting for mediocre performances was expressed by all three groups from this study (see Chapter Four) and was recognised as a protective strategy against standing out within the schooling environment.

Student and parent participants are reflecting the influence of egalitarianism as a cultural norm in their conceptualisations of giftedness and talent. It could also be argued that their views about giftedness are influenced by what others have called an anti-intellectualism discourse within New Zealand schools and communities (Knudson, 2006; Moltzen, 2011b; Riley, 2001). That this discourse is still operating within school communities was supported by the reviewers for the ERO (2008) report. The reviewers found that the parents at the visited schools frequently talked about their negative perceptions of gifted and talented students. The parents mentioned the 'Tall Poppy Syndrome' and referred to the highly able students as 'nerds' (p. 46). The students and parents from this research study are all too aware of this view, as their cautious responses indicate.

Austin and Hastwell (2010, p. 95) call it the "intellectual cringe." For New Zealanders, it is even broader than this and could be said to be about more of an anti-arrogance discourse; any form of boasting about one's own achievements, in any field, or those of one's children, is duly frowned upon in New Zealand. Coupled with the knowledge that these participants have of the 'Tall Poppy Syndrome,' it is highly probable that this kind of cultural expectation would have some impact on their construction of views about giftedness.

This discourse is not unique to New Zealand society as Robinson (2008) notes similar issues in American society:

Particularly rampant in American life is a spirit of anti-intellectualism, a denigration of the “elite” status of the bright and high performing (except in sports). Fairness is seen to require equal education (not appropriate education) for all ... (p. 42)

Similarly, an Australian national senate enquiry into gifted education in 2001 had as one of its key recommendations that the country should look at commissioning research into the reasons why negative attitudes to those of high intellectual ability were so prevalent within their particular cultural ethos (McCann, 2007).

The students and the parents from this current study have taken on board the message that to be gifted and talented in New Zealand is not something to be shouted from the rooftops but rather an identity that should be underplayed in keeping with the preferred New Zealand cultural demeanour of modesty and self-deprecation. I would argue that for adolescents this brings mixed messages. As Riley (2001) puts it:

So we may well send all our students the message that they should be the best they can be – after all, they're Kiwi kids, who we know are Wheat-Bix kids! Yet, at the same time we busy ourselves with the job of 'cutting them down to size.' (no page)

Cross (2001), too, writes of the mixed messages that gifted students can receive within a school environment, such as claims that giftedness either does not exist, is not important or that gifted students are already at an advantage so shouldn't be given any further special treatment, while at the same time they are being encouraged at home by their parents to do as well as they can at school. Some students from my study experienced these tensions between home and school. For example, Mr Bubbles' parents were never told he had academic ability during his primary school years but he was constantly given attention for his distractible behaviour, rather than any achievements, until he went to Skye Intermediate. Autumn Ashes was not challenged by several teachers when she was younger because, according to her mother, they found her intimidating and thus she looked to home for the stimulation she needed.

Many highly able students can find themselves facing the entrenched views of some educators whose implicit beliefs about giftedness are that all children are gifted and talented, thus negating any kind of exceptionality. The teachers in this study, too, saw high achievement as being more about hard work than having exceptional ability. These views could be seen to be influenced by cultural understandings based around egalitarianism. Further, the “one dimensional” academically gifted student was not valued as much as the all-rounder by the teachers (see Identities theme), reflecting New Zealand cultural values of anti-intellectualism. These views are often developed as a result of limited exposure to any kind of professional development in the area of gifted education, as evidenced by this quote from one of the teachers in this study:

I like to think all kids are gifted though, in some ways. I guess though we label gifted and talented as – what is it, though?
(Teacher of April)

Perhaps this is the key point for students, teachers, and parents alike – “what is it, though”? Although it was never my intention that this research would produce a definitive answer to this question that has challenged researchers in the field for decades, I did aim to explore the implicit theories of the participants, as pointed out in Chapter Two. The study was influenced by the epistemological question “Who is qualified to judge what is giftedness?” I argue that one answer to this question is that it should be those who are experiencing the lived realities of ‘being’ gifted and talented and that their voices should be heard. Thus, the contributions of gifted and talented students to any conception of giftedness and talent within their school community should be recognised.

Silverman (1993) believes that young gifted students “are often genuinely perplexed about the meaning of giftedness” (p. 86) and she attributes that in some part to the general confusion in society itself over the nature of giftedness and talent. To a certain extent this was replicated in my study. The students were not confident in espousing a single, universal definition of giftedness and talent, which was similar to the stance taken by the Ministry of Education in policy documents in New Zealand (see Chapter Two). It is possible that the students were reflecting that they had not been exposed to any universal definition during their schooling experiences. However, they did construct their implicit definitions under a common socio-cultural premise which

indicates that in New Zealand society as a whole there is an understanding about what it means to be gifted and talented.

The students from this study had constructed their meanings of giftedness and talent in line with what they understood was acceptable within the mainstream culture of ensuring everyone was more or less equal and that being exceptional at anything needed to be played down in line with New Zealand's egalitarian societal ethos. They had learned by the age of 14 that culture and context mattered. The influence of a particular New Zealand cultural discourse around giftedness, that involved an understanding of the importance of New Zealand's egalitarian values and trend towards anti-arrogance, could be seen to overlap with adolescent cultural expectations and the issues of fitting in, for these students, as they negotiate 'being in the world' as gifted and talented young people. This will be discussed further in this chapter under the theme of the Complexities of Identities.

The enigma of potential

From "Boy," a film by Taika Waititi:

He was a good student, like you. Full of potential.

Hey, Mr Langston. What does that word mean? Potential.

It's 3.30, mate. I'm off duty. (Waititi, 2010)

Notions of potential and reaching potential were very potent in this study. These notions contributed strongly to the essence of the participants' understandings about the phenomena of achievement and underachievement. This finding is congruent with the majority of the literature on both achievement and underachievement for gifted and talented students in which the terms 'reaching your potential' or 'not reaching your potential' frequently appear (see Chapter Two).

It is not only in the empirical literature that one finds the terminology based around the concept of potential when referring to our most able students. As represented by the teacher in Waititi's film, references to students' potential are common among New

Zealand educators anecdotally and the terminology also appears in New Zealand educational policy documents. The MOE handbook for schools, (2012a) begins with a foreword by the former Secretary of Education which states that the handbook aims to help schools support their gifted and talented students to reach their full potential in academic, emotional and social domains. However, it appears that, for gifted and talented students, ‘reaching your potential’ is not solely about achieving as an individual. There is an assumed expectation in both policy statements and the literature that if these young people are helped to reach their potential, this will be of benefit to wider society as well. For example, the Secretary’s statement in the handbook goes on to say that if these talented students can reach their full potential this will help the Ministry in its wider aim of making sure all students improve their performance. On page 4 of the handbook, the expectation that this unknown potential must be reached brings even more heightened responsibility, as the writers then nominate gifted and talented learners as having the potential to be some of New Zealand’s greatest assets:

There is also increased concern that the potential of one of our country’s greatest natural resources may go unrealised if we fail to support gifted and talented students appropriately. (Ministry of Education, 2012a)

Further, international literature frequently includes the notion that gifted and talented learners are likely to be the ones to use their talents for the service of society or to be the ones who will make the discoveries which will take us into the future (Delisle, 2006; Piechowski, 2006). It seems that the message for gifted and talented learners is that, for them, potential relates both to personal ability and to a moral purpose, in terms of a contribution to society.

These ideas resonate with those of Renzulli, a leading researcher and writer in the gifted field. In a seminal article in 2002, Renzulli talked about expanding the conception of giftedness to include co-cognitive traits, derived from the positive psychology movement. He wanted giftedness to be seen as being about the promotion of social capital, which he describes as “a set of intangible assets that address the collective needs and problems of other individuals and or communities at large” (p. 35). He rejected the competitive model for able students, such as the goal of making it to the top in the corporate world. Renzulli saw achievement for gifted students as

about being a good citizen, in line with the views of some parents and teachers from this study. In researching, and working with and teaching gifted individuals, he feels we should be asking the vital question:

What causes some people to mobilise their interpersonal, political, ethical and moral realms of being in such ways that they place human concerns and the common good above materialism, ego enhancement and self-indulgence? (p. 36)

The notion that achievement can be about a valuing of co-cognitive traits is not unique to the parents and teachers in this research, within their particular cultural context, or to writers such as Renzulli. The belief that achievement could be about a feeling of well-being that includes a balance of happiness, and contributing to one's society, resonates with Bevan-Brown's findings about what Maori see as highly valued achievement (Bevan-Brown, 2009). This includes, but is not limited to, highly developed moral values and a sense of service to others. Other cultures also value the ability to show concern for others and this was discussed in Chapter Two when looking at socio-cultural conceptions of giftedness. For example, the ideas that the African, Latin American and Filipino cultures have about high achievement (Phillipson, 2007; Sternberg, 2007) and those of Chinese parents (Chan, 2009; Wu, 2008) could be said to mirror those of the middle class European New Zealand parents from this study in that a concern for others is highly valued.

This view that gifted and talented learners have the potential to use their co-cognitive traits for society's benefit is taken up by New Zealand academic, Bevan-Brown, speaking to educators about the importance of supporting this group of learners, at a national conference in 2012:

Gifted children, arguably, have the greatest potential to make the best times better and the worst times worse. Consequently, in gifted education we have a great burden of responsibility. The challenge is not only to develop our gifted children's intellectual and creative abilities but also their sense of responsibility, their tolerance and caring for each other and the environment so that their inventions, policies and practices lead us away from the brink of earth's destruction rather than hastening our journey towards it. (Bevan-Brown, 2012)

It seems that for gifted and talented students, the phrase ‘reaching your potential’ contains a wider mandate than it does for their peers. These students should do the best they can individually, but also be the ones responsible for the improved achievement of all learners in our schools, and as resources for wider society.

School policies, publicity brochures and mission statements from the schools in this study often used a term such as ‘reaching their full potential’ when making claims about their provisions for gifted and talented students (for example, Jura School). However, despite the frequent use of the concept of potential in the literature, in policy statements, and in school documents, this study found that the concept of potential was seen as an enigma by the participants. Thus, definitions of achievement and underachievement based around ‘reaching your potential’ or ‘not reaching your potential’ are theoretically unsound.

Potential and underachievement

The participants from this study constantly referred to the ability that one was capable of as ‘potential’. In addition, the frequency with which these participants referred to the phrase ‘not reaching your potential’ aligned with the propensity of those writing in the literature about underachievement in gifted and talented students. Students, teachers and parents all held to the view that gifted and talented students possessed this inexact ‘potential’ that should be lived up to, and if a highly able student was not fulfilling his or her potential, then this was underachievement.

This study highlighted a theoretical conundrum in linking the concept of ‘potential’ to the phenomenon of underachievement for gifted and talented students. As Delisle (1999, 2006) has pointed out, the idea of ‘reaching one’s potential’ is an ill-defined concept and it was one that was not clearly understood by the participants in the study. If underachievement is not reaching your potential, then it follows that one needs to know what this potential is in order to avoid underachieving. Both the students and the parents from the study, and to a lesser extent, the teachers, were not sure that they could isolate this concept for themselves as individuals. Despite their frequent use of the phrase, there did not seem to be a clear understanding from the participants about how to reach one’s potential or, at least, when exactly one would know that one had reached it. I argue that this is an important distinction as it follows

that if this ‘potential’ had been reached, a student was presumably no longer at risk of underachieving. Yet the participants’ understandings about underachievement were constructed around what was, for them, the imprecise concept of ‘not reaching one’s potential.’

The participants’ responses were in line with the findings from a study by Lee (1999) whose participants, teachers, also maintained that a gifted child was someone who showed potential, but who could not give a precise meaning of that potential either, relying on what Lee called “nebulous criterion” (p. 187). If the concept of potential is based around a nebulous criterion, I contend that teachers and parents are not on solid ground when they refer to students as underachieving if they are ‘not reaching their potential,’ because there is no real understanding of where the limit for each student might be. It seems that any judgement as to whether potential is being met, or not, is generally left to adults who will somehow know when the elusive potential has been reached. But as the parent of Mr Bubbles says, “I didn’t really know what he was capable of. And how do I find out?” The study aligns with the arguments of Delisle (1999, 2006) and others (Emerick, 1992; Robertson, 2003; Schultz, 2002b) in that it problematises the linking of the concept of potential, which is seen as an enigma, to underachievement for gifted and talented learners. It seems that educators and parents, along with those writing in the literature, are happy to liberally use the terminology around the concept of potential for gifted and talented students, but most, like the teacher in Waititi’s film, go ‘off duty’ when it comes to explaining what this notion actually means.

Potential as a burden

Coupled with this uncertainty, there was an understanding from all three participant groups that, in comparison to their peers, there was an added responsibility for gifted and talented students to fulfil their particular potential because of their high abilities. Being seen to have high ability could become a ‘burden of potential’ for some. As Rambo intimated, if you had this ‘potential’ then you probably should do something with it. The high expectations that these students undoubtedly had of themselves (see Chapter Five) could be seen to be a result of their knowledge of being highly able, and a sense of the responsibility that came with this. This understanding was then reinforced through their positioning by parents, teachers, and peers as learners who

were capable of achieving at exceptional levels. For these students, possessing such potential was a constant reminder not only of what they wanted to achieve but perhaps what they felt they should achieve, resulting in the “I can do better” mind-set of many of these adolescent participants.

Student participants talked about others who weren’t achieving to their perceived potential, the ones whom they knew could do better, like Autumn’s “bubbleheads,” but did they themselves feel this burden? They had previously shown the ability to achieve highly in their schooling career and thus felt that they were expected to continue to do so, to ‘reach the potential’ that they were ‘lucky’ enough to possess, or else the spectre of underachievement was levelled at them, usually by parents and teachers. The tenuous concept of potential was used by others and adopted by the students themselves as a pressure to fulfil their responsibility to achieve highly for the benefit of themselves, and perhaps of wider society.

It has been noted that there is often an expectation that our gifted and talented students are the young people to whom we should look for our future. However, in this research study it was the parents and teachers who were positioning these able young learners in this way, signalling their adult values (see Chapter Five). The student participants did not construct achievement in similar ways by referring to ‘good citizenship.’ Did these parents believe that personal happiness and ‘reaching your potential’ is intrinsically linked to a moral purpose? It could be interpreted that some of the parents were of the view that being intellectually gifted is not enough if one did not contribute in some way to one’s society, the social capital that Renzulli (2002) favours for gifted students. Such messages from their parents and teachers could be problematic for adolescents, and lead to tensions as they strive to negotiate multiple expectations from their peers, their parents, their teachers and themselves.

This theorising of potential as a burden is similar to theories espoused by Piechowski (2006), who agrees that there can be tensions for gifted and talented students around expectations that key adults have of young gifted adolescents using their potential for the good of society. Dai (2010) expands on this premise when he lists arguments that he maintains are often put forward in support of developing programmes for gifted education. The *cure for cancer argument* (original italics from author) is based around the idea that it is gifted and talented children who have the best chance of solving

urgent problems in the world so it is important to put resources into their development. The *enhancing-social-capital argument* asserts that enhancing the moral qualities of the gifted and talented will mean that societies will benefit from strong leaders who put integrity above economic competition (p. 160). These arguments align with those of Renzulli (2002). It could also be interpreted that for some gifted and talented students, the expectation that he or she might be looked upon as someone who could ‘cure cancer’ or ‘enhance social capital’ may be seen as a challenge, but for others such lofty expectations of potential can be burdensome.

Furthermore, it was implicitly transmitted to students in this research study that teachers held different behavioural expectations of them than they did for other students (see Chapter Five). There is often an unrealistic expectation from adults that gifted and talented students should be good at everything they do (Silverman, 1993). Messages were being received by the students that as gifted and talented students there was a different set of expectations for them than there was for other learners. They felt that these expectations were directly related to the potential that they were seen to be ‘lucky’ enough to possess. This could be construed by some of the students as a specific burden of expectation, one that was not similarly being placed on their peers.

Parent participants, too, showed an awareness of the ‘burden of potential’ for gifted and talent adolescents when they talked about the expectations they had for their gifted and talented students. It has been previously discussed in this thesis that parent participants were wary of the ‘pushy parent’ nomenclature and they did not feel comfortable publicly boasting about their children’s abilities, but at the same time they were encouraging and supportive of their able children and wanted to see them achieve to the best of their ability. Parents from this study admitted that they felt a responsibility to ensure that their children ‘fulfilled their potential,’ or maximised the abilities that they had been given, and this was especially important because of the high abilities of these young people. Parents talked about feelings of frustration when gifted and talented students did not achieve highly, because they saw these students as the country’s future leaders and the ones who would “go off shore and do things” for the benefit of New Zealand society (see parents’ understandings about underachievement in Chapter Five). Thus, despite not wanting to ‘push’ their

children, and attributing an understanding of achievement to well-being rather than being only about academic success, there was a tacit view that their children of high ability should succeed in some field. These understandings from the parents only add to the complexities that parents of gifted and talented students face as they endeavour to support their children. They want their children to be happy and well-rounded, but at the same time they admit that they wouldn't want them to be "washing cars" as a career, either. This would be not reaching their potential, in the view of the parents. Thus, parents are negotiating complex issues relating to their own and society's expectations of gifted and talented students, and the roles they play in sustaining these expectations, while at the same time supporting and caring for the broad well-being of their children.

There are also complex issues for educators. There is a balance for educators to negotiate in supporting gifted and talented learners in schools. As Csikszentmihalyi et al. (1997) point out "anxiety occurs primarily when teachers expect too much from students; boredom occurs when teachers expect too little" (p. 10), a mantra which could equally apply to all learners, but one that particularly could be drawn from the experiences as told to me by these participants. No student should feel compelled to perform at the highest level in areas that he or she does not find personally meaningful (Dai, 2010). This study suggests that teachers should not be placing an unrealistic burden of expectation on these highly able students that could affect their achievement. However, at the same time teachers need to ensure that those who are not performing at a level at which they may be capable of are recognised and are not ignored for appropriate provisions in schools.

Although most of the teachers viewed 'reaching potential' in a performance way (measured by test results or work produced), some believed that it was the "flashes of potential" (Teacher of April) that helped them to recognise some gifted and talented students. Some students who were not performing highly, regularly, in school-related tasks and who may then be labelled as underachievers, could at times show exceptional insight or an outstanding knowledge base in a specific area that might lead a teacher to question the underachiever label. There is a school of thought that supports maintaining the notion of high potential particularly in relation to the phenomenon of underachievement (Reis & McCoach, 2000). The predictive nature of

children of high promise, the notion that some learners have the ability to achieve highly but for some reason are not doing so, needs to be retained if we are to include among our gifted students those who have not yet performed at a mastery level due perhaps to environmental causes (Dai, 2010; Gagné, 2009). If educators do not recognise the children who have the potential to perform at exceptional levels but who are not performing, then they will not necessarily be identified as gifted, underachieving or not. Therefore, the only students recognised as gifted and talented in our schools would be the ones Lohman (cited in Dai, 2010, p. 231) calls “high-accomplishment students.” There are those who could display high aptitude if, among other things, appropriate instructional processes were put in place. These high ability students might rely on their predictive promise, and perhaps “flashes of potential,” rather than current performance, for recognition of their abilities by educators.

Students as rational decision makers

Further to the essence of the ideas that these gifted and talented student participants had about underachievement, were behaviours and choices that fitted with those of Delisle and Berger’s (1990) concept of selective consumers. Selective consumers choose not to perform to what others may see as their ‘potential’ in a given area because of a perceived lack of interest in a content area or a situation that is not seen as relevant to the learner. These selective consumer students are aware that they are underachieving and their underachieving behaviours fluctuate over time. However, their decision to ‘underachieve’ can be seen and theorised as being made rationally and logically and in spite of expectations from adults that they have the ‘potential’ to achieve highly in such areas. Some of the students in this study were making decisions about when to achieve highly, at what times in their schooling that they needed to work to the best of their ability and at what times they could ease off and still pass, but not necessarily reach their peak, their perceived ‘potential.’ They were rationally choosing to operate as selective consumers.

According to Markus and Nurius (1986) there are many possible selves that students might accept, reject or choose to pursue. The adolescents in this study had accepted notions of high achievers as being the possible selves they hoped to become in the future. However, some of them did not see much of the curricula presented to them at school as being relevant to their aims for the future. Learning that, in their view, did

not have a point to it was shunned by some of these highly able students and several admitted to choosing not to engage fully in subjects that they felt lacked this future-related relevance. This view was similar to that of the students in the study by Pomerantz and Pomerantz (2002) in which the Able Underachievers group stated that they attached great importance to relevance. In this current study, Bruce Wayne, for example, has as his future plans the aim of becoming a doctor and thus his interest in subjects like History and Geography is very low. Although he is quite capable of performing well, in these areas he has chosen not to put in the effort. The fact that these students were, at this relatively early age, even considering their future careers (and, furthermore, futures which were couched in terms of high achievement), firstly, could be seen as a point of difference from many of their peers of the same age and secondly, supports the idea that these able learners are behaving as selective consumers. They are actively choosing the areas in which they will opt for lower achievement and have analysed the reasons behind their choices.

Therefore, in line with planning for one's future success, school work that prepared the students for exams was seen as worthwhile, while other kinds of school tasks were not valued. The students seemed to be well versed in the school culture that doing well in exams was important for the future success for which they were aiming. They were making personal and selective judgements that this kind of academic achievement was valuable and useful for them. In particular, at the time of being interviewed, most of these young learners were looking towards working harder in the next year (Year 11) when the first outside examinations began for them. In contrast, Year 10 was seen as a wasted year of very little relevance in terms of learning for these adolescents, as Autumn Ashes maintains:

Like, Year 10's the year where everyone just thinks you do nothing
and everyone bunks off the whole year and they go out and get drunk
and it's, like, the year of doing nothing before NCEA.

Decisions not to work to their 'full potential' were consciously made by some of these adolescents in relation to specific periods of schooling, such as Year 10, but also across curriculum subjects. All three participant groups – students, parents and teachers – understood that underachievement for gifted and talented students was about accepting 'mediocrity' (see Chapter Four). It was about performing to an

average standard in a particular area: passing but not excelling, gaining a C or a B or a Merit rather than the A or the Excellence that was possible. It was rarely about failing. Thus, the labelling of a good or mediocre performance as an underachieving one was the difference between underachievement for highly able students who “could do better” and for other students of lesser ability in schools. Teachers and parents see these kinds of behaviours of selective consumers as causes for concern, as such behaviours can become habit forming (O'Neill, 2011). A tendency to get by on mediocre efforts can lead to passive acceptance of achievement at an ‘acceptable level’ far below what these highly able students may actually be capable of in most areas. The longer such behaviours continue the more difficult it is to remediate (Rimm, 2006).

As well as making decisions about whether or not to achieve in certain areas of school related tasks, these young people were also making rational decisions about their priorities in life as a young person looking to develop a social place in their world. These decisions meant choosing not to work to one’s ‘potential’ in some school areas because of a need to prioritise a social life.

When talking about their understandings of underachievement for gifted and talented students, these young people alluded to the importance that highly able learners put on their developing social life, in common with most adolescents of their age group, and the dilemma this could present for them. These adolescents understood that achieving highly was sometimes sacrificed if a gifted student felt the need to prioritise social acceptance or chose to focus on relationships at the expense of study. This finding aligns with the conclusions of Mathews and Foster (2009) that striving for high grades may not rank as most important in a gifted and talented student’s life at certain times in his or her schooling (see Chapter Two). Bruce Wayne’s parent summed this up when she remarked: “It’s not their driving force in life to get 7 out of 10; their interest is in other areas.”

Autumn Ashes used the example of the “bubbleheads” in her Maths class, who she thought were “smart, when they do try” but who chose to spend their time “bunking” and socialising in the malls, thus placing socialisation above achieving highly. The students from this study didn’t condone prioritising socialisation to this extent, but it was very clear that events happening in their social lives were more to the forefront of

their minds than school achievement at this stage in their lives. Hubert Cumberland said “my social life is probably the most important part of my life,” and Autumn Ashes admitted that “I really can’t be bothered at the moment; I’ve got, you know, social stuff going on and I’m just distracted.” The students did admit to feeling some pressure from friends, at times, to socialise rather than study for a test or complete an assignment. There was added tension for them in negotiating a balance between achieving high expectations of school success, of ‘reaching their potential’ which was often defined by adults, and fitting in to a ‘normal’ social adolescent world which seemed to be more important to many of them (see discussion on a Conformist identity under the next theme).

However, these student participants could be seen to be acting as rational decision makers as they chose to prioritise different facets of their time and experiences. There were times when some put their social lives above their academic needs – “my social life keeps me sane” (Bruce Wayne) – and times when some chose to “not go to the party and study” (Hubert Cumberland). Rather than these decisions being seen as some sort of inadequacy in not fulfilling potential, they can be understood as the rational decisions of selective consumers as they balance competing interests (academic and social) in their daily lives.

Complexities of identities

I hate how people are judged by, you know, like, what they look like or how cool they are, or how good they are at sport and you know, like, how many boyfriends they have and, you know, that sort of thing ... (Hubert Cumberland)

The shaping of identity is a fluid, multiple and on-going process (Vincent, 2003). Identities are constantly being constructed and reconstructed in relation to the different social and cultural settings in which we have our experiences. Identity development for all adolescents is focused on finding out “Who I am?” and “What I am going to be?” – a search for self (Dillon, 2011a; Vialle et al., 2007; Zuo & Tao, 2001). Adolescence is a period in a student’s life that sees anxieties about one’s social and sexual development begin to take priority over less pressing demands. Several writers have maintained that the pressures of adolescent identity development are

exacerbated if you are a gifted and talented young person (Ellsworth, 1998; Luus & Watters, 2012; Neihart, 2006; Vialle et al., 2007). This study revealed complexities in adolescent identity development for gifted and talented students as they negotiated adolescence and being gifted and talented. Within the contexts of their schools, these young people were working out who they were as members of a broader adolescent culture while at the same time recognising that an identity as a gifted and talented student might impact on any social positioning in the school world. As Vincent (2003) notes the shaping of identity is affected by both “structural forces and individual agency” (p. 5). Students are beginning to make their own choices about their developing sense of self – they have agency – but these choices are influenced by the cultural context within which they find themselves – the structural world of school. The students from this study were experimenting with a variety of adolescent identities as they looked to find a fit in the social world of school.

Dai (2010) makes the point that there can be no generalisation about the psychological needs of all gifted and talented students because, like any group, they are not a homogeneous group in terms of their personalities. However, he believes that for students who are highly able and who are seeking excellence, there are heightened problems of frustration, alienation, and confusion as they wonder whether they are choosing the right path.

High aspirations and self-expectations, sometimes along with high social expectations, add stress to their lives in a way typically not felt by others. Besides, the process of becoming from the current state to a future desired state has many uncertainties. (p. 240)

The findings of this study support the notion of a diverse group of gifted and talented adolescents who have had differing schooling experiences but who have each felt, at various times, the tensions around being highly able in a peer environment that may not value public aspirations for academic excellence. This led to some stressful times for these young people at various stages of their schooling experience. Participants’ experiences were in line with those involved in Keen’s (2005) New Zealand study, in which he reported that most of his participants revealed feelings of anxiety around peer relationships. Several other studies referred to previously in this thesis have reported gifted students’ attempts to develop social relationships, and their struggle for acceptance into groups at school, as being foremost among their concerns (Eddles-

Hirsch et al., 2012; Kirby & Townsend, 2001; Neihart, 2006; Pomerantz & Pomerantz, 2002; Renold, 2001; Renold & Allan, 2006).

The strength of groupism, which is the tendency to think and act in the same way as other members of a group in order to conform to the accepted patterns of that group (Merriam-Webster, 2013), was a strong theme from the data. All of these young people were searching for a group to which they could belong, as does any adolescent. However, for these gifted and talented students there were underlying messages from their peer group and wider society that to identify as strongly academic meant a more challenging route to social acceptance. The stories told by the participants in this study revealed complex identity issues for some of these bright students as they worked to understand their place in the adolescent social world while still maintaining their pursuit of high achievement.

However, in line with Dai's (2010) point about the heterogeneity of gifted and talented students, the experiences of the participants from this study illuminate differences as well as similarities in identity challenges and negotiations. The students in this current study represented a variety of identities. Some students appeared to be developing an accepted adolescent cultural identity within their school with relative ease. They appeared to be relatively well adjusted. Neihart (1999) found that highly able students are just as well adjusted as their age-related peers and that these young people do not contend with any greater social and emotional issues than do other students, although she did also find that gifted and talented learners are subjected to a number of situations in the schooling context, that could create risks to their social and emotional development if their needs are not recognised. Robinson (2008) argues that "on average, gifted students are more mature socially than their age peers" (p. 34). Similarly to Neihart (1999), she believes that disconnect and tension occur when gifted and talented students are placed with peers who are a poor fit in terms of interests, abilities and aspirations, or into a schooling environment that is a mismatch. Some of the adolescents from this thesis study reported that, at the time, they were managing to merge a successful social life with continued academic, sporting or other extra-curricular achievement. This is not to say, though, that they were not cognisant of the identity development issues that fellow highly able students may have faced. For example, even though Hubert Cumberland related that she was enjoying her social

and sporting life and that her latest academic results had also been pleasing, she spoke often about the stereotypical views that she noticed her peers espoused around high achieving students who were not as popular socially: those who did not fit what might be termed the all-rounder profile in the way that she perhaps did. The implication was that this created challenges, and was difficult for her gifted and talented peers.

There is an obvious overlap between the theme of Complexities of Identities and that of Culture and Context Matter, as school culture is part of the context within which these young people are constructing their adolescent identities and sense of self. For some there was a more natural fit for their developing identities within the culture and context of their school; for others, fitting in, and being a gifted and talented student, was more difficult and anxieties were becoming evident.

Complexities around identity development link with the theme of the Enigma of Potential. The focus for these young gifted and talented students, like most students of their age, may well be around finding out ‘who I am’ rather than on ‘reaching their potential,’ no matter how high that potential is deemed to be. Decisions on achievement in school are likely to be influenced by identity negotiation as students negotiate who they are and who they want to be and consequently how they will behave as a social being.

Identity profiles

Chapter Five looked at some of the different identity negotiations that were on-going for the adolescents as they experienced ‘being in the world of school.’ In this section, I weave together different aspects of these identities into four Identity Profiles. This is an approach that has been taken by several writers in the field of gifted education (see Chapter Two), to help to shed light on the diverse types of young people that make up the gifted and talented population. To my knowledge, there have not been any typologies or profiles developed within a New Zealand context that are based on the perspectives of the students themselves, although Keen’s (2005) case studies (see also Chapter Two) could be said to have presented an example of an amalgamation of the different qualities of gifted and talented students.

I have developed identity profiles of gifted and talented adolescents that are an amalgam of the heterogeneous group of young people who shared their experiences with me. The four profiles are meant to highlight the complexity and diversity of negotiating identities for gifted and talented learners. The rich data that was provided by the participants have been synthesised into these identity profiles to provide an illustration of some of these complex identities. They are in no way intended to be taken as the only identities for gifted and talented students, but it is hoped that they may provide some insight into the ways in which highly able adolescents within a New Zealand cultural milieu could be developing their sense of self as they negotiate 'being in the world of school.'

Caution is advised in using such identity profiles as each separate identity is not intended to solely represent an individual student on his or her own. There is fluidity between identities as students develop and change their identities over time. In addition, at any one time a student may fit within one or more of the described identities. However, I contend that there is value in presenting these identity profiles as a theoretical proposition arising from this study and as a way of presenting insights from students' lived experiences.

The Conformist identity: Fitting in is more important

I just want to be like everyone else

The conformist identities that are encompassed under this profile have in common the desire to fit in with particular social norms. The students from this study talked about what I interpreted as two faces of a Conformist identity: that of the young person who wanted to fit in with the social norms of the dominant adolescent peer group, and, secondly, that of the student who worked to fit in with the social norms set by significant adults in their world of school.

For several of the students in this study, identities were being constructed around the need to conform with the social norms of the adolescent peer culture of their school, as they perceived it. The development of a Conformist identity is linked strongly to the understandings discussed under the theme of Culture and Context Matter, that many gifted and talented students are not comfortable being nominated publicly as

gifted and talented within the social context of their schools. The students who were working towards a Conformist identity seemed to want to avoid being seen as “the students who did their homework at lunchtimes” (Parent of Kurt), and they used code switching behaviours to try to fit in with other mainstream groups within their schools. These were the ones who tried to resolve their identity struggles by attempting to be like everyone else – to fit in with the ‘normal’ group, as they saw it. When Autumn Ashes was younger, she tried to choose this path, as her mother explains:

And sometimes I think you can choose to be like them. I know that’s definitely what happened in primary school ...we didn’t actually like standing out ...

As adolescents, Kurt tries to join the ‘rugby group’ at his all boys school, Oliver Stone works hard to be included in social media sites, Rambo tries to be the ‘joker’ and to be more ‘sporty’ in order to gain acceptance. These young people are working hard at “fitting in, and having the right look and, yeah, the right crowd” (Autumn Ashes’ mother).

According to Schultz (2003), young gifted students are often aware that they are different from their peers because of their advanced perceptual and emotional intensities. In Margrain’s (2005) study, children as young as four years old already knew to alter their behaviour in order to fit in with social expectations. The students in this current study were aware of their differences from many of their peers in terms of ability, but in the precarious period of adolescence most were not comfortable in being singled out for attention or praise for achievements. Such attention was in fact the antithesis of the Conformist identity they were trying to achieve. This special attention did not go down well with the ‘group’ fit.

Schultz (2002a) noted a similar reluctance from the two students he identified in his study. ‘Kate’ had managed to achieve at a level that was socially acceptable to her peers rather than at her true level, “thereby remaining in the perceived good graces of her peers” (p. 2011). If ‘Shawn’ were to perform at the 99.9 percentile rank he had been measured at, he would stand out from his peers as an anomaly and this would be socially destructive for him, he felt, so he did just enough so as not to draw attention to himself. Both were making rational choices to opt for mediocrity. Fitting in, the

pull of groupism, was more important than succeeding at a high level in school tasks and the two students had made that choice. This is another example of the forced choice dilemma in practice (Gross, 1989). For some of the students in this thesis study, there was a strong pull from the group to fit in, to conform to peer expectations, and to be 'normal' and some were accepting this kind of identity for themselves. It was not possible to surmise as yet whether or not any of the students who were beginning to move towards a 'fitter-in' identity were at serious risk of long term underachievement. Suffice to say that the strength of groupism was a strong pull for some of these students. Despite expectation of high achievement from themselves and others, the pull of the group may be too strong for some, longer term. For some, any long term underachievement may not be an issue for them, even if it is for others.

There were also conformist forces in relation to gender roles as students sought to fit in with the social norms of peers in the world of some schools. The male students were very aware that masculine sporting prowess led to popularity in the school social rankings, especially at an all boys' school like Jura School. The participants from this study echoed the responses of the boys in the Australian study of gifted adolescent boys (Monceaux & Jewell, 2007). Fitting in to the powerful group in a boys' school was about being the sporty boy, reinforcing the stereotype of the masculine, sporty New Zealand male as a dominant sub-culture. This presented a dilemma for the non-sporty academic male whose identity was not valued by his peers and who may have chosen to change his developing identity in order to conform to the required fit within this dominant male culture. Kurt, by the time of his second interview at the end of Year 9 was 'code switching' and talking the 'tough' boys' school talk, in an effort to conform to the expectations of his peers. By the middle of Year 10, this seemed to have affected his developing sense of self, and his introverted behaviour was becoming of huge concern to his mother and to the school counsellor.

Girls, too, were susceptible to conformity with gender social norms. Fitting in as a gifted girl was much easier if you knew how to behave in the social world of adolescent female-hood – being able to talk about fashion and boys and one's appearance. Fitting in with the 'popular' group was more about carving out an identity as a "bubblehead" or a "plastic," as Autumn called them, certainly not taking on an academic achiever identity. Autumn relayed stories of other bright girls whom she felt

were using code switching behaviours to fit in with the dominant group of girls. April, too, spoke of able girls at her school who resorted to social ‘fitting in’ behaviours such as being “generally obsessed by things that happen outside of school, more hormonal things, friends, boyfriends, what they’re doing in the weekend and stuff.” Hubert Cumberland saw the way popular girls’ groups were played out in her school in a similar way and she reacted against this, rejecting what she saw as their stereotypical judgements. Although these adolescent girl participants didn’t support the kinds of attitudes they were describing, they did, however, understand that it was the ‘way things were’ in the social culture of school. They recognised that some gifted girls seemed to be choosing this type of identity for themselves.

Conforming to the overall social context of their particular school is important for many gifted and talented students as they develop their identities (Eddles-Hirsch et al., 2012). The culture created in school can impact on feelings of acceptance or rejection for gifted young people in their schooling environment. The dominant cultures of individual schools played an influential role in the choices that students in this study made and impacted on the behaviours some students chose to perform in order to fit in with these cultures. It was interesting to note that these school cultures were strongly and historically entrenched. For example, Jura School was well known as the “sporty, macho” school for boys. Bruce Wayne, who went to this school, felt that, “Like people don’t really care. It’s, in Math you’re smart – who cares? Whereas, sporting is more praised.” Islay School, in contrast, was considered to be for more academic boys and Mull School, which was co-educational, was the one to attend if you were interested in music, but was not strong in the traditional, especially male-oriented, sports. Hubert Cumberland maintained that,

It’s kind of different with a girls’ school, I reckon, than a boys’, but yeah, I reckon we’re sort of quite all-round.

April thought that her girls’ school was more “mixed” as well.

It seemed that no matter what kinds of messages parents or teachers might try to give to adolescents about certain schools, the entrenched traditions of the schools, as they were perceived by the students themselves, were very difficult to change. It would take a considerable cultural shift, for instance, for Jura School to be seen by local

students as anything but a macho, sporting environment for young boys. Working to fit into, to conform to, a particular school culture as it is seen by the peer group adds another strand to the issues around identity construction that highly able students face.

A different kind of Conformist identity is represented by students like April who are desperate to achieve highly, not only for themselves, but in ways that fit in with the expectations of the school hierarchy and other adults (see April's story). These norms are set by adults who act as the gatekeepers and the judges. Thus, despite their insistence that they are making their own choices about what high achievement means for them (see Chapter Five), several of these high performing students are in fact endorsing the decisions that are made by others about what constitutes achievement. Significant adults such as parents, teachers, coaches, and tutors all require these adolescents to develop a Conformist identity in order to reach the high achievement, the 'potential,' that they expect of them. April strives to do well in exams, to gain lots of school badges (bling), and to be a school leader. She is aiming to fit in with the accepted culture of school as it conforms to adults' values. As such, she would belong to a Conformist identity as much as would Kurt with his code switching behaviour as he tries to fit in with the norms of his peers in his school culture.

As adolescents, conforming to the expectations of one's peers was a strong pull for these participants (for example, Mr Bubbles, Kurt, Rambo) but there were also those who were willing to conform to the expectations of parents and teachers (for example, April, Oliver Stone) and to the expectations of sports coaches or music teachers (for example, April, Oliver Stone, Hubert Cumberland, Bruce Wayne). There are a variety of reasons as to why these gifted and talented students choose to conform, some of it to do with searching for a fit within a peer social milieu that has eluded them, and some to do with simply "reaching goals that are fully predictable in relation to the norms and values of contemporary New Zealand society" (Keen, 2005, p. 215). A gifted and talented adolescent who sees 'fitting in' as being the ideal could be seen to be developing the identity profile of a Conformist identity. Such a choice can have an effect on decisions about achievement in their world of school.

The Rebel identity: A selective consumer

I don't see that as being relevant for me

In contrast to a Conformist identity, a Rebel identity fits more closely with Delisle and Berger's (1990) idea of a selective consumer. This is characterised by some degree of non-conformism towards the required expectations of performance, set by adults.

Many of these students were beginning to make their own rational choices about the areas in which they wanted to achieve. These were often purposefully in areas which did not conform to the expected norms of school, or they gave more attention to extra-curricular passions rather than the school related tasks that adults such as parents and teachers expected would be their focus, because they were high ability students.

Extrinsic rewards such as high grades, academic acknowledgements in other forms (scholarships, school prizes, badges, school 'colours,' the 'bling' April talked about) or awards for high achievement in other domains were not valued by these young people. A Rebel identity was about being the 'non-Dux,' for example. Working towards being the academic dux of their school would not be a goal for these students, even if this was something that teachers and parents felt they had the potential to achieve.

Mr Bubbles, for instance, seemed to be less motivated by obtaining high marks and being recognised as an academic achiever as he moved through into Year 10. He was, according to his mother, obsessed with the computer game of Second Life, which he was proving to be very adept at and he spent hours playing this. He was also a talented soccer player. But he was resisting aspects of an academic identity. Several students (for example, Bruce Wayne, Oliver Stone, Marty, Autumn Ashes) showed tendencies of a Rebel identity when they spoke out against the lack of relevance of some school subjects for their future. They were reluctant to put effort into these as they saw no value in doing so. These students all had passionate interests in areas of their own choosing; they were reflecting a selective consumer mentality. They were selecting aspects of schooling that they saw as being most relevant and which may advance their future aspirations (such as exams), but at other times choosing not to conform to the expectations of adults (such as doing well in non-assessed work in Year 10).

For some, the beginnings of a Rebel identity was about developing a self-image as someone who would stand up for what one believed in, holding fast to principles. Lewis cared greatly for the environment, and holding true to his beliefs, he joined the

school Environment Committee in Year 9. According to his teacher, he was the only boy his age to do so. His passion was more important than a need to conform to the expectations of behaviour for boys of his year level. Perhaps the young person developing this kind of Rebel identity is the early ‘protester’ or activist. The students from this study all talked about their understandings of achievement and underachievement as being measured by their own expectations (see Chapter Five), not those of others such as the adults in their lives. For some, this valuing of their own agency was demonstrated more strongly than others in their developing sense of self.

Further manifestations of the rebel identity are found in the attribution of blame to others, such as teachers, and to external factors. Rambo directed any blame for his lack of achievement towards factors outside of his control, such as a mismatch with teachers, or distractible peers, rebelling against taking any of the responsibility himself. Astrid blamed the pressure of her commitment to her outside activities for not doing as well as she could in some academic subjects. Oliver Stone, too, felt he was not always supported by the school when he had competing cricket commitments, which were often about representing the school. Kurt, who as an adolescent was desperately trying to conform with his peers, at one and the same was acting as a Rebel identity in his relationship with some teachers (e.g. “my Science teacher is a cow”), something which his mother reported he had never done in his earlier school years. Kurt tries on the Rebel identity again when he maintains that “I don’t care too much what people think,” which is in direct contrast to his code switching behaviours as he tries to fit in with the boys’ school environment. This demonstrates the fluidity of identity negotiation for these young people as they try to find their own sense of self within their complicated schooling world. Several gifted and talented students who underachieve in school tasks tend to take up this blamist position. Success would have come if the questions in the test had been fairer, if the teacher had taught them the correct material, if his friends had not made him go out the night before the exam, if she had not been so busy with dance rehearsals (for example, Astrid) and numerous other such excuses that place the blame for failure on to others.

It was evident from the stories told by these adolescents that there were times in their negotiating of identities when some of them were experimenting with being rebellious. However, as with all the Identity Profiles presented here, it is worth

repeating that it would not be accurate to categorically label any student as solely belonging to a Rebel identity profile.

The Nerd identity: Reclaiming the ‘nerd’ as a positive identity

I’m the weird one and that’s OK

For some gifted and talented students, being in the world of school made more sense and was more comfortable for them if they learned to embrace an ‘other’ identity. Unlike the Rebel identity, this was an identity that was originally placed upon them by others. The most common ‘other’ identity emerging from the data was the Nerd identity. They were likely to have been positioned as nerds negatively by their peers and sometimes by adults such as teachers. However, with the support of other like-minded peers, some gifted and talented adolescents were deciding to reclaim this negative positioning and reframe it as a positive discourse. Students talked of being in the ‘weird group’ and of being comfortable with the nerd label because being a nerd could be redefined as a positive construct rather than the derogatory construct assigned to them by some of their peers.

Groupism played a strong part in such a decision to align oneself with the Nerd identity. In contrast to the conformist pull of groupism that led to trying on different identities and resorting to code switching behaviours, some students found that being with others who were also finding a fit within a Nerd type identity enabled them to be part of a different kind of group. April was able to laugh off remarks about her being a nerd, where previously these would have upset her, because she had friends who were also within the ‘other’ group and this sense of belonging made her feel more comfortable with the academic achieving identity. She could even see several positives of being in “the nerdy class” such as “we get the opportunities that they don’t really get” and “other people sort of, like, respect us.” April was not trying to become part of the popular girls’ group, to conform with certain of her peers, as she might have done in her primary and intermediate school days. Rather, she had accepted her ‘nerd’ status, within the “nerdy class,” and was continuing to work towards success in high school. The fluidity of identities is illustrated again here as

April's search for a sense of self can be seen to move between Nerd and also Conformist identities. She wanted to conform to adults' expectations in her high school years and embrace being a nerd identified as academically able.

Autumn Ashes, too, began to develop an 'other' identity within her "big little community of little weird kids" because this was "kind of like the people I fit in with." She was happy to be in the weird group, comfortable with others of like identity. In addition, it was interesting that Autumn and her group were beginning to forge a defence against those who saw themselves as being in the mainstream of adolescent socialisation. This group of misfits sought to reclaim their 'other' identity as a positive one, despite the attempt by peers and wider society to marginalise the 'nerd' as an identity. These students were looking to establish alternative identities as academic achievers with more eclectic interests. A way of maintaining these identities was to reject the behaviours of the more popular group and their fascination with things like boyfriends, fashion, weekend parties, and bunking school. These misfits negatively positioned the popular group in the same way that their outsider group had been positioned by others in the past. With the support of a group that was a fit, the tables could be turned. By reclaiming the nerd identity and changing perceptions, nerds could become "very cool," as Autumn put it.

April, too, expressed frustration at the immature behaviours of some of the girls who were writing messages on social media sites about teachers and other girls, thus re-positioning a socially 'popular' group of girls at her school. This reflected an embracing of her identity as a more mature, academically achieving student who wanted to be noticed for the academic badges, the "bling" on her blazer. She felt "I wouldn't like to be one of the people who didn't have any" [academic badges] which is a reversal of the way she had felt in her earlier school years.

The Nerd identity has elements of the Conformist identity for these students as they often do want to succeed highly in school, and appear content with that success being judged by significant adults in their schooling world. But it could be said that their conformity is more particularly in areas of relevance and interest for them and dependent on their own group norms; for Autumn and Astrid's 'weird' group, it was the music area, while for others it might be computer technology, maths, science or literature. Further, the enthusiasm with which the Nerd identity is being reclaimed by

some of these gifted and talented adolescents also resonates with a Rebel identity as they stand up for their interests and values against the mainstream culture of their schools. These identities are all inter-connected and an individual may comfortably display elements of multiple identity profiles.

Interestingly, the data showed that it was easier to reclaim the nerd as a positive status from within the comfort of a streamed class than it was if one was in a mixed ability class. The strength of the group that comes from being in a streamed class was a theme that emerged from the data (Chapter Five). The fit for many of these students was made easier when they were in accelerated or streamed classes, even though these were designated as “the nerdy classes” by peers, as they felt that there were others with whom they had more in common. They were not subjected to the same stereotypical discourses within the streamed class that were experienced by their peers who were outside of that class. Again, being in a larger group, a class, made it easier to stand up to such derogatory positioning and the streamed classes became a close knit environment for the students, one in which they could find themselves embracing the Nerd identity as a wider group.

The All-rounder identity: A preferred identity for the New Zealand adolescent?

I just like to be involved in a whole lot of different things

The socio-cultural milieu of their schools seems to lead to an overall understanding for these New Zealand gifted students, and their parents and teachers, that the preferred adolescent identity is that of the all-rounder. These ideas resonated with those of a study that looked at school achievement in adolescent girls (Roeser, Galloway, Casey-Cannon, Watson, & Tan, 2008). Roeser et al. hypothesised that adult approval of positive early adolescent identity development for young girls involved both being a good student and being a good person (p. 116), aligning with this study’s findings from parents’ and teachers’ about well-being. Roeser et al. termed this student the “have it all” student (p. 145). This was the student who was able to successfully merge competencies in the academic, sporting, cultural and social fields. Some gifted and talented students appear to be able to do this almost

effortlessly, achieving highly across a variety of domains and remaining popular with their adolescent peer group. The understanding that an All-rounder identity was the preferred identity was keenly felt by these highly able adolescents and impacted on the decisions they made as they looked at 'fitting' in at their respective schools. There was an overlap with a particular kind of Conformist identity as students looked to develop an All-rounder identity in order to match what they saw as a set of broadly held, ideal New Zealand values.

It was well understood by the students, and their parents, that it was not enough to be academically intelligent if one wanted to make it in social terms in a New Zealand school. In fact it could work against you. Parents like Oliver Stone's mother were concerned that a student might be classified as a "nerd" or a "teacher's pet" and get "a hard time" if they were seen as too bright. They thought that students were better prepared if they were "not exclusively academic and could do, you know, all-round things." Bruce Wayne, for example, fitted in easily to his all boys' school because he was seen as an all-rounder and Lewis, although quirky in his personality and willing to follow less popular pursuits, was enough of an all-rounder to be accepted by his peers in his all boys' school.

Most teachers from the study saw the All-rounder identity as preferable. Lewis' teacher thought that the academic boys at his school were "one-dimensional" and "not the ones you want to be friends with," unlike the all-rounders. He felt that Lewis did well in different things, "and he does well in things that are not necessarily graded or marked." The teacher of Bruce Wayne and Oliver Stone talked about the importance of boys being able to integrate into society well rather than being 'just' academic high achievers. Parent participants agreed with the teachers. They saw all-round achievement as the goal for their children. All of the parents talked about wanting their child to develop into a well-rounded young person who could become a 'good contributing citizen.' "Excellences or whatever, but that's not everything" as Rambo's parent said: "I mean to me, a high achiever at school is being a good, rounded person." April's parent talked about "those human elements" that made one a better all-round person.

Thus, the gifted and talented students in this study were being given messages, both explicitly and implicitly, by the significant adults in their lives, that the All-rounder

identity was the preferred goal for adolescents in the socio-cultural milieu of New Zealand schools. Lewis could possibly be seen as one who was developing an All-rounder identity with his eclectic range of interests. In respect of being able to successfully combine academic, sporting and social abilities, so too could Hubert Cumberland and Bruce Wayne. April saw the value of working towards cultivating an All-rounder identity in her school as she pursued her academic and musical abilities but she also wanted to perform highly at sport (netball) and to be a school leader. Kurt's attempt to play rugby could be seen as a way of developing a more All-rounder identity, albeit one that fitted in with his view of his school culture. Kurt did in fact have a range of interests but some of these (for example, Sea Scouts) did not seem to 'fit' with the All-rounder identity that might be accepted at a school like Jura. The rugby experiment may also have been a way of trying to add social acceptance, via a rugby team, to an all-rounder profile.

Heath, a student interviewed for Austin and Hastwell's (2010) book about top students from New Zealand and Australia, agreed that to be an all-rounder was preferable and he extrapolated these expectations to the way bright New Zealand Year 13 students should perhaps look at preparing for study outside of school:

Most of the scholarships tend to go to students who sell themselves as all-rounders rather than high academic achievers. I would encourage any Year 13 students applying for scholarships to universities in New Zealand to emphasise their extra-curricular activities above and beyond their academic achievements ... (p. 246)

These kinds of messages can lead to bright students who are experiencing 'being in the world of school' in New Zealand perceiving their identities, as academically able students, as less valuable than all-round and less academic students, or not good enough. It can lead to them accentuating their efforts to try and change their behaviours to become that prized all-rounder. This is the code switching that Neihart (2006) describes. This may mean hiding or masking their true identities (Gross, 1998), as they search for ways to become what they are not, in order to match the All-rounder identity. For many students, to reinvent themselves as an all-rounder is not always feasible and can lead to anxiety and ridicule from peers, such as in Kurt's experience. Striving to develop the All-rounder identity can also lead to stress, as exemplified by April who struggles to find time to "blob" because her extra-curricular

activities “take up all my lunch breaks and some of my after school time.” April represents what Roeser et al. (2008) describe as the “have it all” adolescent girls who were already finding themselves under considerable stress in their early high school years, as they endeavoured to hold on to their status as popular, attractive, athletic and high academically performing girls. For others in this thesis research, there appears to be no desire to become the all-rounder and they may continue to embrace and develop Rebel or Nerd identities. However, there is a danger that self-concept may suffer if gifted and talented students perceive that to be academically able, or to be highly able in other domains such as music or performing arts alone, is not as valued as it is to be an all-round achieving student.

Model of identity profiles

Figure 2 presents a model of the four identity profiles discussed in this theme of Complexities of Identities.

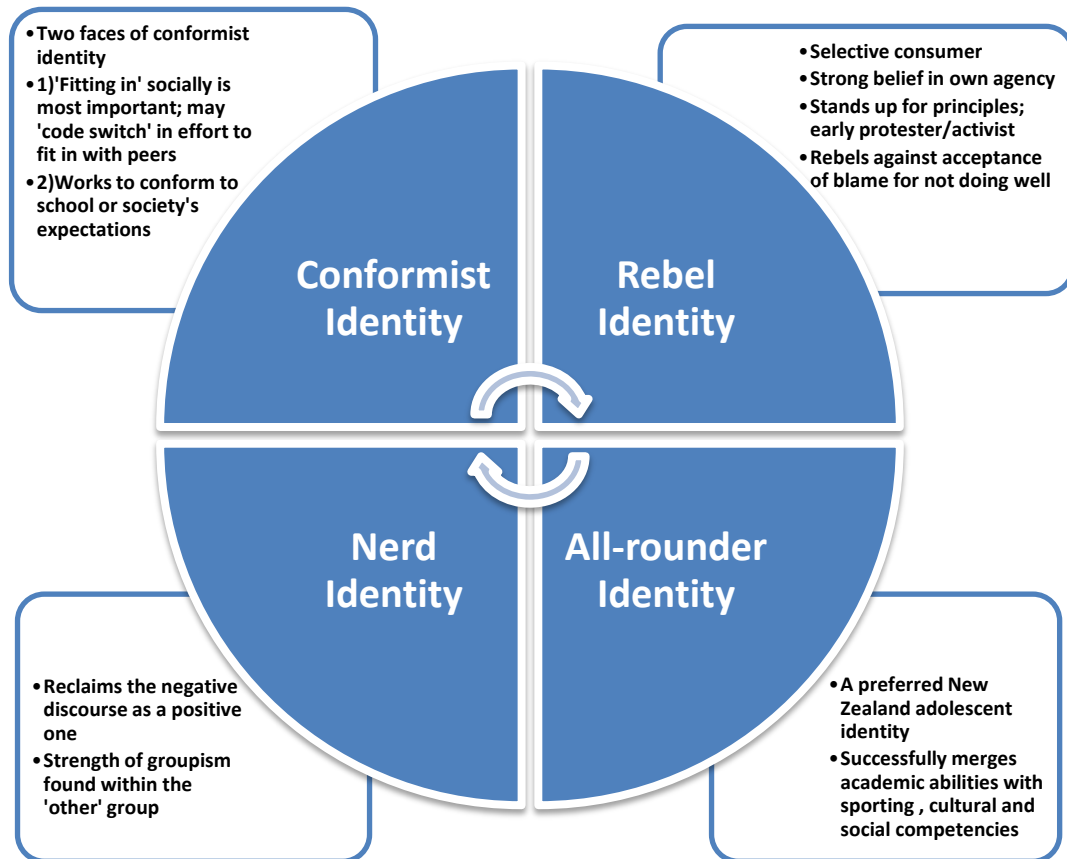


Figure 2: Gifted and talented adolescent identity profiles within a New Zealand socio-cultural framework.

The *Revised Profiles of the Gifted and Talented* developed by Neihart and Betts (2010; see Chapter Two) are the most recent examples from the literature that could allow comparison with these profiles. Neihart and Betts' Underground Profile refers to a student who feels he or she would be betraying one's social group by achieving academically (as per a Conformist identity) while the student from the Creative Profile is strongly motivated to follow any inner convictions (Rebel identity). Behaviours under the Successful Profile include a desire to achieve and conform and the seeking of teacher approval (Conformist identity). Keen (2005) similarly found that a rebel profile and a conservative profile emerged from his case studies of gifted and talented adolescents in New Zealand.

Although there is some commonality between these profiles and those of Neihart and Betts (2010), there are also differences. The Identity profiles presented in this model have been developed from the stories collected from one group of adolescents, and any findings are thus derived from, and relate to, this group. As such they are not meant to be representative in any way of the identities of all gifted and talented students experiencing schooling in New Zealand although “an extension can be considered through theoretical generalizability” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 4) and readers may choose to relate the ideas from this model to their own experiences and professional knowledge.

Chapter summary

I conclude this chapter by presenting a series of propositions linked to each of the three themes discussed. These propositions act as key summary points relating to the findings from the study, and as challenges to thinking about gifted and talented students, their achievement and underachievement, and their experiences of school in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Propositions arising from the theme of ‘Culture and context matter’

Proposition 1:

The prevailing Western cultural myth that all gifted and talented students believe that high achievement is about innate ability and that success will come without effort needs to be de-bunked as it is doing students a disservice to view them in this way. Many gifted students in New Zealand schools find themselves having to defend themselves against a ‘luck’ discourse because of such assumptions. This does not lead to either their cognitive needs being met, or help them find a place for themselves in the social context of school.

Proposition 2:

Parents see achievement for gifted and talented students as being as much about well-being as academic success. These understandings are influenced by the socio-cultural milieu of New Zealand and contradict assumptions within popular culture that most

parents of gifted and talented students see high academic grades as the only measure of success for their children.

Proposition 3:

Gifted and talented students are not comfortable being nominated publicly as gifted and talented within the socio-cultural milieu of New Zealand schools. They understand that exceptionality is negatively stigmatised and prefer to downplay their abilities in order to fit in.

Proposition 4:

A New Zealand construction of giftedness and talent is influenced by a socio-cultural tradition of egalitarianism, and by an anti-achievement discourse. Although some tenets of egalitarianism were valued by the participants, the danger of an over-emphasis on egalitarianism is that this could lead to a trend towards mediocrity for young gifted and talented students if exceptionality in any area of human endeavour is not valued in the socio-cultural milieu of our schools.

Propositions arising from the theme of ‘The enigma of potential’

Proposition 5:

Definitions of achievement and underachievement, for gifted and talented students, both in the literature and from the participant data, are strongly based around the notion of ‘potential.’ A gifted and talented student’s potential cannot be reliably measured, yet expectations of achievement are measured against this concept. Structuring definitions of achievement and underachievement for gifted students around ‘reaching potential’ or ‘not reaching potential’ is not *theoretically* sound and can become an unfair burden for these students.

Proposition 6:

There is an expectation from teachers and parents that gifted and talented adolescents will achieve highly for the benefit of wider society. This can create a ‘burden of potential’ for gifted and talented students.

Proposition 7:

Teachers and parents should have an understanding that gifted and talented students are as susceptible as any other adolescent to underachievement because of a preferred focus on negotiating a successful social life. This underachievement may, or may not, be seen as something negative by the students.

Proposition 8:

The ‘problem’ of underachievement for gifted and talented students can be thought of and understood as a tension between the values relating to well-being and to ‘reaching potential.’

Proposition 9:

Gifted and talented students make rational choices about whether or not to perform at high levels in school-related tasks, depending on their perceptions of the relevance of said tasks. Teachers and parents should see these behaviours as those of selective consumers rather than chronic underachievers, which may require them to respond in different ways.

Propositions arising from the theme of ‘Complexities of identities’

Proposition 10:

The strength of peer culture, as evidenced by the most powerful sub-groups in schools, can lead to a quest to ‘fit in’ being one of the strongest influences on identity negotiations for some gifted and talented adolescents. A variety of identities can impact on decisions that a student may make about achieving or not achieving academically in school.

Proposition 11:

Some gifted and talented students act to conform to expectations to achieve highly and relating to their status as gifted and talented students. Others find strength in their own agency and choose not to conform to the expectations of others. Those trying on

a Rebel identity are capable of achieving highly in an area in which they themselves see relevance.

Proposition 12:

Being the ‘other’ such as ‘the nerd’ or ‘the weird one’ provides a ‘fit’ or place of comfort for some gifted and talented students within the socio-cultural milieu of New Zealand schools. Re-constructing the Nerd identity as a positive identity in our schools could support the identity development of these young people and enhance their achievement.

Proposition 13:

There is an acceptance that the All-rounder identity is the preferred identity in New Zealand culture, both at school and at home. There can be pressure on the gifted and talented adolescent to develop such an identity in order to ‘fit’ in the socio-cultural milieu of New Zealand schools.

While the themes of Culture and Context Matter, the Enigma of Potential and the Complexities of Identities are presented separately, they could also be read simultaneously as each is connected to the others through varying points of convergence. Together, these interconnecting themes and the propositions that have arisen from them are meant as a challenge to educators and to promote a re-thinking around teachers’ and other professionals’ own experiences of supporting gifted and talented adolescents in schools. The final chapter attempts to summarise the re-framing of ‘being in the world of school’ that has come from the study, by looking at what might have been learnt from the stories of these diverse young participants.

Chapter Seven:

Issues of Thoughtfulness and New Understandings

“I’ve had an epiphany.” I said, “Great, good on you, what is it?” “I’ve had an epiphany. I’m really gonna do really well this year.” He said, “I’m gonna do the best of my ability,” and he said, “Because I feel better inside,” he said, “when I’m getting good things.”
(Parent of Rambo)

Introduction

I began this study guided by Max van Manen’s (1990) philosophy about phenomenological research. At its conclusion, I believe that the study has kept faith with his ideas and enabled “the theoretical practice of phenomenological research to stand in the service of the practice of pedagogy” (p. 12). It is my hope that the findings have highlighted a “ministering of thoughtfulness” (p. 12) that will in turn contribute to a re-thinking of pedagogy by schools around the ways in which they support their gifted and talented students.

I have experienced several “epiphanies”; new understandings from listening to the narratives of April, Astrid, Autumn Ashes, Bruce Wayne, Hubert Cumberland, Kurt, Lewis, Marty, Mr Bubbles, Oliver Stone and Rambo. I learned as much from these young people who generously shared their lived experiences with me, and from their parents and teachers as I hope the readers of this thesis may learn from them. I have more of an understanding of what it is really like ‘being in the world of school’ for one group of gifted and talented learners experiencing school in New Zealand.

This final chapter unpacks some of the key contributions and implications from the thesis, which are framed as “Issues of thoughtfulness” for educators involved in policy and practice with this group of learners. The chapter continues by looking at personal lessons that I have learned through the experience of doing this research. Some of the methodological insights that have arisen from the study are examined, including what I view as limitations to the approach chosen. Finally, I propose ways in which the study has contributed to the field of gifted education and suggest

opportunities for future research with the diverse group that is gifted and talented adolescents in New Zealand schools.

Re-visiting the research question

By asking these adolescents to describe what their experiences are like as they live them, I found that there are specific dilemmas for gifted and talented students as they negotiate an adolescent identity and think about their way of ‘being in the world of school.’ You can be bright, but not too bright so that you stand out; you can be an academic achiever, but you should be sporty and social as well; you can be smart and study hard, but you also need to be ready to party when your friends demand it; if you are a bright boy you had better be a bit macho, too, if you want to avoid the ‘dreaded nerd’ label; you can be a smart girl, but you need to know how to be ‘popular’ too. Hearing these kinds of societal messages within their socio-cultural milieu can lead to confusion and tensions for gifted students. Such messages begin to influence decisions that the students might make about achieving at school.

The lessons that can be taken from the students from this study are that they understand the socio-cultural challenges that are particular to being gifted and talented in New Zealand’s egalitarian society. They understand that it is not popular to stand out as being exceptional but they also see that part of their ‘being in the world’ is to be a high achiever. It is such a dichotomy that can make negotiating ‘being in the world of school’ more complicated for the gifted and talented adolescent than it might be for many of their peers. As young developing adolescents, they are faced with the challenge of juxtaposing these two competing positions. The ideal world of school, for these students, is one where educators support the development of both high achievement and the evolving construction of adolescent identity for these young people.

The theorising that has evolved from the research draws into question some of the commonly held ideas about the experiences of gifted and talented students in schools, which are presented below as Issues of Thoughtfulness.

Issues of thoughtfulness around ‘Culture and context matter’

There are several areas of thoughtfulness that educators could consider in relation to culture and context. The study could be seen as debunking the societal view that gifted and talented students do not value effort in relation to achievement, but rely on ability alone for success in school. Rather, the understandings from these students, and from the parents and teachers, about the value of effort for achievement (as outlined in the findings from Chapter Four), are shown to be linked to the socio-cultural context of the school and society in which the students are experiencing achievement.

The idea that someone is blessed with abilities that are far superior to others and thus doesn't have to work hard in order to achieve does not fit with the recognised values of a New Zealand society and espoused egalitarian national tradition. Such an egalitarian view challenges the assumption of advantage because of superior ability. Being seen to achieve simply because of that endowed advantage is not respected in New Zealand society and schools, in the same way that success through hard work might be. Therefore, it makes sense that these participants have constructed beliefs about achievement that are based around effort, something that is traditionally valued in New Zealand society, as well as ability. This could be seen as both a defence against being stigmatised as unfairly advantaged and as representing the broad, shared, social values that these gifted and talented students and their parents hold. Their understandings about achievement do not deny their high abilities, but it is ability coupled with hard work, an admired societal value as they perceive it.

The construction of the meaning of achievement for gifted and talented students was influenced by the socio-cultural values they understood to be acceptable in their environment. There could be a tension for students in trying to reconcile cultural values of fitting in at school, being above average but not exceptional, with competing values of being the best they can be – of demonstrating exceptionality.

Images of the ‘pushy’ parent of the gifted child who values high achievement above all else are often portrayed in the literature and in the media (Anyan, 2012; Laugesen, 2011; Silverman, 1993). Care needs to be taken in applying these ideas to a New

Zealand context as they are not represented by the understandings of high achievement that these parents demonstrated in their responses for this study. The parent participants were reflecting what may actually be the cultural preference of New Zealand parents for their children to achieve highly, but at the same time to be happy, which in part meant having a positive social relationship with their peers, and in part to learn to live as contributing citizens in society. These views could elicit a re-framing of how wider society might see the understandings that parents of gifted and talented students have about achievement for their children.

How might understandings of culture and context influence planned provisions for gifted and talented students within the particular socio-cultural milieu of schools in New Zealand? How much thoughtfulness is actually given by educators to the implicit views of the gifted students themselves, in constructing conceptualisations of giftedness and talent that reflect the socially constructed realities of the students experiencing the world of school? It is my contention that definitions of giftedness and talent articulated in school policy documents and used as guiding statements for pedagogy are still too often based on conceptualisations and models that are imported from overseas research and based only on explicit theories evidenced through this international literature.

Understandings about giftedness and talent are constructed within the context of a particular society and as such it is important to pay attention to the socio-cultural factors which might affect the gifted and talented students' experience of schooling. Recognising this suggests it is misguided to make decisions of both policy and practice, for students experiencing school in the cultural milieu of a New Zealand school, based on literature and models that are drawn from cultures such as those of America or Britain. There is a challenge for educators in this country, who may rely on importing ideas from different cultures, which may not transfer easily to the particular context of a schooling culture in New Zealand. New Zealand educators should ensure that the conceptions of giftedness and talent and the ensuing pedagogical decisions they make for gifted and talented students reflect the socio-cultural context of schooling in New Zealand.

Further, there is a tendency for decisions on gifted programming to be made by management – teachers, and the 'experts.' Too often assumptions are made that

schools are providing effectively for gifted and talented students simply because there is some sort of a programme in place. Programmes are only successful if the students who would most benefit feel comfortable about taking up these opportunities within the context of their particular school culture. It may be that the practice of designating students as gifted and talented, and then singling them out for GATE (Gifted and Talented Education) programmes, is not the most desirable for some students as they reject the notion of standing out, or being seen as different in any way from their peers. If students are not comfortable with being labelled as gifted and talented within the socio-cultural milieu of school, then they may not take up the opportunities offered. Educators may be wasting their time putting in place specialist programmes for gifted students if the students are not willing to be seen as part of such an enterprise because of concerns about social fit being more important. I do not advocate a return to the time when euphemisms were in vogue – for example, “children with special abilities” (Moltzen, 2011a, p. 39). Merely ‘watering down’ the label does not serve to prevent marginalisation. Caution needs to be shown by the decision makers within each school, to ensure that they are not in fact disadvantaging a labelled group of young people by providing them with specialised programming within a particular school culture that may in fact increase feelings of marginalisation. Ideally, the cultural context of a school would be that of positive acceptance for high achievement in all areas, by both peers and adults. If this is the case, negative stigmatisation around being labelled gifted and talented is less likely to occur.

I suggest that the voices of the students in this study, around experiencing being gifted and talented in the world of school, could lead teachers and management to ask if the culture that they think they are establishing in the school is actually happening? Or do the narratives of the students themselves tell another story? These student voices suggest that educators who make the claim that the ‘Tall Poppy Syndrome’ does not exist in their school environment might be doing so from a position of naïve power that is counter-productive to the social and emotional needs of many in the group that they are aiming to support. The gifted and talented students within each school culture have much to contribute in terms of an in-depth knowledge of the prevailing discourses in their school and about what might work for them, cognitively, socially and emotionally. Thus, I advocate that teachers and schools take this into consideration when making decisions about programming for these highly able

students, at this particularly vulnerable age, within the particular socio-cultural milieu of schools in New Zealand that has been described by the young people from this study.

A further consideration arising from the study is that if gifted and talented students in New Zealand schools reflect the socio-cultural values of modesty and self-deprecation in their positioning of themselves as able learners, and giftedness is seen as less than exceptional, it could be that some will not aim for the excellence of which they are capable. Keen (2005), when considering his young New Zealand participants, suggests that we should be “uneasy about the extent to which our gifted young seemingly, set their goals according to the evaluative norms of the society wherein they operate” (p. 216). The data from this study could be seen to support such a concern. It may be an added struggle for a bright adolescent who faces these mixed messages of being encouraged to achieve highly because he or she has the ‘potential’ to do so, but realising that to achieve too highly, too often, is not always valued in the culture and context of their school milieu. As Kurt says, someone “will turn around and get all offended.” Hubert Cumberland feels that “wherever you go there is always someone who has got Tall Poppy Syndrome.” Are we at risk of encouraging mediocrity from the most able students within our schools if this cultural expectation of ensuring everyone is ‘the same’ prevails? Having heard the views of these students, the challenge for parents, teachers and policy makers could be to support these students in negotiating competing values of not standing out within the world of school, but at the same time encouraging aspirations for excellence and high level contributions.

Issues of thoughtfulness around ‘The enigma of potential’

Issues of thoughtfulness that can be seen to have arisen in relation to this theme relate to the nebulous understanding of the concept of potential, definitions of underachievement, and the competing ideas about the ‘problem’ of underachievement for gifted and talented learners.

Despite the imperfect understanding around the concept, the findings of the study showed that the tendency for educators, and sometimes parents, to use ‘potential’ as a

measure of achievement or underachievement remained strong. However, Balchin (2009) maintains that we are,

...on very shaky ground when we presume to rank order children on their relative potentials. This is because the science of cognitive measurement is too imprecise for us to ascertain with any degree of certainty which child has more potential than others or in which areas. ...we have to be very careful when setting limits on students' potential for learning. (p. 51)

Balchin is suggesting that we should not put limits on students' potential. Too often this can be the frustrating case for many highly able learners, who are met with ceiling effects in their learning, but at the same time there can be tension if students are made to feel that they can never live up to their high ability. Allowing students to believe that the essence of underachievement is about 'not reaching their potential' places an unfair burden on them as learners, particularly if no one is able to explain to them what their true potential might be. The constant strain to push on to an unknown 'potential' can lead to stress for young gifted learners. They may find themselves constantly feeling under pressure to be doing better, as is reflected in some of the responses from the young people in this study (see for example, the section on "I can do better" in Chapter Five).

The experiences from the students from this study indicate that educators and parents need to be wary of positioning gifted students as underachievers by using certain standards that others have designated as their 'potential' but that may not be realistic for the learner. This is in line with Delisle's (1994), and others' (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002; Rimm, 2008; Robertson, 2003; Schultz, 2002a) concerns that this 'problematising' stance means the learner is being seen as the problem in the underachievement story because he or she has not yet reached a 'potential' that others have set.

Further, if the maximisation of potential, which is an enigma, is a core value that is held by adults, but not necessarily by the students themselves, then this could lead to conflict between the two groups. Gifted and talented students may not actually see themselves as underachieving in particular areas, in contrast to the views of parents and teachers in their lives, and vice versa. The expectation that gifted and talented students should reach their 'potential,' whatever that might be, may be part of the

narrative around achievement and underachievement for parents and teachers but it may be that some students are choosing not to perform at a high level in order to fit in with their adolescent social world, perhaps seeking ‘normalcy,’ rather than ‘potential.’ This dilemma was evident for several of the students from this study, who admitted to prioritising a social life over ‘reaching the potential’ that others expected from them at school.

In addition, educators and other adults may hold high expectations associated with high status careers, in respect of the most able students. Willard-Holt (2008) found in her study of gifted females who chose to be teachers that the young women were constantly being given messages that they were underachieving because of their choice of career. The expectation was that they had the ability to choose what were seen as higher status careers and teaching was not considered in this line. One young woman was told by her friends and parents that, “You have so much potential – why are you doing that? You could be doing, I don’t know, brain surgery or whatever” (p. 320). Similarly, although parents from my study expressed a wish for well-being in terms of personal happiness for their highly able children, they also admitted that they had high expectations in terms of future careers for their children. The assumption from these parents was that ‘reaching your potential’ did not translate into ‘low status’ occupations such as being a plumber or washing cars.

My research and the literature suggest that it is not reasonable to burden these adolescents with others’ expectations of high achievement, which may not necessarily correlate with theirs. Failure to reach these expectations is then labelled as underachievement. Such expectations are based on value judgements that are generally those of adults. Parents from this study admitted to having particular expectations for their children in terms of future goals. Although the students were still aiming for future selves that were focused on high achievement, they were adamant that they had their own understandings about what achievement, and thus underachievement, meant for them, which were governed by their own expectations (see Chapter Four). They expressed a desire to follow their own goals and aspirations, not those of significant adults.

Therefore, the nature of the problem of underachievement for these learners can be re-thought and re-constructed. While some adults such as teachers and parents hold a

deficit position in their concerns over gifted students not reaching their potential, this is not the case for the students themselves. Gifted and talented or not, adolescents are adolescents and as Csikszentmihalyi et al. (1997) state, “ adolescence is the time when most persons first make critical decisions about how to allocate their own limited resources of attention and about what is most worth doing” (p. 42). For many adolescents, choices to ‘not reach their potential’ in specific areas are made within the context of the whole of their development as individuals negotiating ‘being in the world of school.’ It could be valuable for educators to develop the understanding that many gifted and talented students are indeed making rational, and in their view, logical choices to underachieve in some areas and that this choice making is an important part of their growth as independent individuals finding their way in the mire that is the adolescent world. The problem of underachievement by ‘not reaching potential’ is a problem for adults rather than for students.

Despite a desire by gifted and talented students to achieve highly in school, they are like any other young person searching for a place in the social world of adolescence and many may not be willing to sacrifice that for top achievement in any field. It could be argued that these students shouldn’t have to make a choice between a positive social life in adolescence and success in their area of talent. Educators and parents need to support gifted and talented students to ensure that they are able to function in an environment where the social and affective issues affecting these young people are also considered. Such an understanding may work as a constructive move towards avoiding possible on-going underachievement or deficit views of gifted and talented students who, for rational, personal reasons, choose not to perform to their potential.

There is a fine line between laying a burden on the shoulders of young gifted adolescents to be the ‘movers and shakers’ of the society in which they live, because of their ‘potential,’ and encouraging them to achieve to their abilities, while still ensuring they maintain a social and emotional balance in their lives. Denoting gifted and talented students as those who will inevitably succeed in life as leaders or society’s saviours could be an unfair burden and could also increase a student’s feeling of ‘otherness’ among his or her peers. Delisle (2006) agrees:

However, to state unequivocally that gifted students will grow to become our future leaders is an insult to one group ...and a source of intense, unwanted pressure on those young people who wear the gifted tag. Too, if you are seeking one more way to make gifted children stand out in an uncomfortable way from others in their school, simply call them tomorrow's leaders while leaving other kids coping with the belief that they will, by default, rise only to the level of our low expectations. (p. 26)

Leaders can come from all groups of students and high expectations for all children would seem the ideal, which does not prevent gifted and talented students from being encouraged to achieve to the best of their abilities. Nor should educators or parents encourage mediocrity from highly able students, or indeed any student. However, the adults in the lives of gifted and talented students need to beware of placing a lofty burden of inevitable leadership and high status achievement on their shoulders in the name of the imprecise concept of potential.

Renzulli (2002) reminds us that we should be wary of requiring young gifted people to achieve to someone else's goals, even if these goals are altruistic and moral ones. Requiring our gifted and talented students to 'reach their potential' when we don't really know what this is and labelling a student who 'does not reach their potential' as an underachiever, thereby positioning that student as a problem, seems to be doing just that. The findings from this study showed that gifted adolescents are able to make their own rational choices about whether or not to achieve, and within what fields they wish to achieve. To label students such as Autumn Ashes or Rambo or Mr Bubbles as "underachievers" and "problems" would be neither helpful nor fair to these young individuals.

I suggest that rather than linking underachievement for gifted students to the inexact concept of 'potential', educators reframe the achievement discourses in school policy documents in terms of reaching achievement goals. This allows parents and educators to respect gifted and talented students as rational decision makers who can set for themselves realistic, attainable and challenging goals, although they may often need the support of teachers and parents to do so. Most of the students in this study, for example, were positive about the benefits of goal setting, but with some conditions in reference to the specific ways they would like to see goal setting happen in schools (see the section on setting goals in Chapter Five). Students talked about "knowing

where you're heading" and a goal being "something you can aim for". Achievement goals can be specified and measured; for example, passing NCEA Level 3 with Excellence endorsement or becoming the lead violin in the school orchestra. A student will either achieve their goal or not. Reaching an achievement goal, or not reaching it, is in contrast to reaching your potential, or not reaching your potential, a concept which is not known to the student and cannot be reliably measured. Exploring ideas about appropriate goal setting for gifted and talented learners could proffer an interesting area for further research.

Issues of thoughtfulness around 'Complexities of identities'

An understanding of the complexity and the tensions around the development of identities for gifted and talented adolescents is important for educators and counsellors in our schools as they work towards supporting these students. I argue that policy and programming for highly able students needs to include an appreciation of the social and emotional vulnerabilities around the negotiation of identities, alongside the provision of support for their cognitive needs.

Teachers do not always know what is going on in terms of identity issues for these students and the decisions they are making may be in direct antithesis to the social and emotional needs of some of these students. The study's findings align with those of others in the literature. Vialle and her colleagues in the Wollongong Youth Study (2007) found that teachers were not always aware of the tensions that able students were experiencing in school, often "oblivious to their feelings" and rating them as "less likely to experience emotional problems," when in fact the gifted students interviewed reported "feeling sadder and more alone" (p. 579) than their peers. These researchers advocated that teachers need to be more sensitive to the affective needs of gifted and talented students in schools in order to alleviate this disconnect, a recommendation that could be supported by the findings of this research study. Neihart (2006) also believes that "schools ought to play a stronger role in helping talented students evaluate the social costs of success and observe, label and critique the 'social geography' of their education and communities" (p. 201) and how this

might affect the 'fit' for some gifted and talented students in a particular school environment.

There are issues of thoughtfulness for educators and parents around the Identity Profiles developed from the findings of this study. Are there ways that educators and parents could work towards turning around the perception of the cultural discourse of the 'nerd' as an unpopular adolescent identity in our schools and work with those gifted and talented students who have embraced the Nerd identity to reclaim it as a positive construct in the socio-cultural milieu of New Zealand schools? Can those gifted and talented adolescents who are trying on a Rebel identity be appreciated and respected for their strength of convictions and alternative ideas, rather than find that their desire to do things differently is rejected by those in authority?

Should we expect more of our schools to develop a culture whereby not only the identity of the all-rounder is highly valued, but equally valued is the identity of the successful academically talented student, and the identity of the student who has a passion and a talent in a single area that they wish to cultivate to the highest level? Moltzen makes the point that within New Zealand "there is a tendency for our schools to value well-roundedness but our outstanding achievers are not necessarily well-rounded" (Moltzen, cited in Anyan, 2012, p. 57). The push to be well-rounded can result in stifling the drive that some gifted students have for their area of passion (Winner, 2000). It is reasonable to expect that a student who is single minded in their drive for success in a particular area of talent could be supported in their aims, rather than be forced within a school environment to spend more time on other activities in an effort to make him or her into that all-round student. It could be interpreted from the findings from this study, that within the particular context of New Zealand schools, gifted and talented students feel the same kind of pressure to develop an All-rounder identity as they do to 'reach their potential.' The drive to be an all-rounder and the burden of potential may not always align for these students in their on-going identity negotiations.

The findings could be seen as complex in nature and as reflecting the heterogeneity of gifted and talented students in New Zealand. However, there was a common premise held by all the students in this study. Despite holding a construction of giftedness and talent as less than exceptional, their discomfort with being labelled as gifted

themselves and their understanding that to be ‘smart’ or a ‘nerd’ was not the preferred identity in adolescence, by the age of 14 they all continued to view themselves as being focused on the path towards eventual high achievement. They at least talked of their possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) their identities for the future, as ‘being high achievers.’ Although they were very aware of the socio-cultural expectations within New Zealand schools discussed in this thesis, these had not become road blocks, as yet, for these particular students. They were each still claiming to be targeting high achievement in both their academic endeavours and in their extra-curricular activities. It would be interesting to re-visit some participants, like Rambo and Mr Bubbles, for whom the line was becoming more blurred, or Kurt, who may have found his identity struggles affecting his performance, but that is beyond the scope of this study. At the time of interviewing, these students continued to see themselves as high achievers and to set high expectations for their future learning goals – “I’m aiming for Excellences” – while at the same time negotiating their way through the differing identities which they were encountering in their adolescent world.

Dai (2010) suggests that gifted and talented adolescents be encouraged to develop “an identity that is true to themselves” (p. 240), and one that is helpful to the pursuit of excellence that they want and need. This could be true for all adolescents in our schools. He suggests a focus on their possible selves would assist in this development and sees schools and counsellors as supports in helping gifted and talented students work towards their aspirations. Educators or supposed experts cannot manage this process of identity construction for them, as it is an ever-evolving one and an individualistic one, but a greater understanding of the specific identity dilemmas that may face this group of young people has the potential to critically influence pedagogical practice.

Further, although the findings point to complexities and tensions in identity development that are accentuated for adolescents who are gifted and talented, it is not true to conclude that all bright young people in New Zealand schools struggle socially. Gifted and talented students are a heterogeneous population like any other population. These participants wanted to dispel the myths and stereotypes around gifted and talented students and it is not the aim of this thesis to condone such

stereotypes. Nevertheless, identity issues are to the forefront of the minds of these young people, gifted and talented or not. What is going on in their social life, in their search for finding out who they are, is probably of more importance to them at this stage of their life than an extension programme at school. This needs to be taken into consideration by educators and policy makers who seek to provide for them. A challenge for educators is to understand the identity constructions of these young people and to find effective ways of supporting gifted and talented students as they work through the process of finding out who they are, where they fit, and how they manage their identities as they experience ‘being in the world of school.’

Personal lessons

The study has both affirmed and challenged some of my pre-understandings about how gifted and talented learners might experience school. In my experience as an educator, I had been aware of the tendency for both gifted and talented students, and their parents, with whom I had worked, to show discomfort at the ‘gifted’ label. There were a few who embraced the term for advocacy purposes but, generally, I had found New Zealand students did not want to be recognised openly as gifted. Hence, I did have some prior assumptions of how these adolescents might approach the question about what is meant by gifted and talented. However, I was surprised at the level of understanding that the students themselves displayed of the socially constructed reality that a particular ‘take’ on egalitarianism is highly valued in New Zealand society, and the effect this understanding had upon their constructions of giftedness and talent. The implicit views of these students and their parents confirmed my own understanding developed through my particular cultural experience, firstly as a parent and later as an educator, that there was reluctance from both gifted and talented students and their parents to publicly acknowledge their exceptionality within the social milieu of New Zealand society.

As an educator, I believe the study has changed the pre-conceptions I have held about achievement and underachievement being couched in terms of ‘reaching your potential’ or ‘not reaching your potential.’ Despite the fact that most of the participants used this notion to define achievement, there was no real understanding of the concept of potential itself. Such an approach can also lead to an unfair burden for

these highly able learners. This study has changed my thinking around defining aims for gifted students (or indeed any students in our schools) along the lines of ‘helping students fulfil their potential.’ I would not support the use of such a nebulous construct in policy documents that inform practice for gifted and talented students in schools.

A further personal lesson for me was the findings from this study that parents, students and teachers all saw the All-rounder identity as being the strongly preferred identity for adolescents in New Zealand schools. Teachers supported the development of all-round young people rather than the ‘one-dimensional’ student, such as the high academic achiever, and parents reported that they wanted their children to be well-rounded. Even students did not support the stereotype of the solely academic achiever as many still feared the ‘nerd’ label, while others felt that in order to gain status in school it was better to be both sporty and bright or to become involved in a variety of interests. These understandings from the participants have highlighted for me what I see as a new conundrum in terms of the schooling experiences for these young people. The pressure to be an All-rounder within the socio-cultural milieu of New Zealand schools may lead to tensions and a lack of support in school for the gifted and talented student who has the overwhelming desire to follow a singular passion.

I was further surprised by the espoused aspirations of all the gifted and talented students from this study to continue to achieve highly in spite of a focus around adolescent identity construction. Identity issues were at times more negative for some of them than positive. Yet the high expectations that all of these young students put on themselves, which aligned with their ideas of their possible selves as high achievers in the future, remained. I had not expected that this kind of resilience would be as strong for these learners as it appeared to be, considering some of the tensions that were at play for them in their social and emotional lives as they experienced school. Their sense of agency and determination to succeed and do things ‘their way,’ despite obstacles to their learning, was an impressive lesson for me.

Methodological lessons

A phenomenological research study asks “What is the essence of this experience for these learners so that I can better understand what this learning experience is like for

these young people?” The methodological lessons I take from my research relate to the strengths and limitations of phenomenological research and the challenges encountered in conducting this type of research.

In recent years, there has been a growing body of qualitative research in the field of gifted and talented education that is based in New Zealand, most commonly in the form of doctoral and masters theses from New Zealand universities. Several recent studies have in common that they have focused on the experiences of students in New Zealand schools and centres and that they have privileged the voices of the participants (for example, Bicknell, 2009; Clark, 2009; Horsley, 2009; Keen, 2005). This study can be seen to add to this body of research in that it, too, positions the gifted and talented students and their understandings at the forefront of the findings of the study. Further, the current study could be seen to contribute to this growing literature by including research which is underpinned by phenomenology as both a theoretical and methodological approach.

The phenomenological methodology was a strength of the research, as it prioritised the adolescent participants as the experts on their own experiences. ‘Giving voice’ to these students can remind those who are usually called ‘experts’ in the area, researchers like myself, teachers and other educators, that these articulate and thoughtful young people have agency and can make their own decisions about whether to achieve or not in their ‘world of school.’ In this respect the study contributes to the psychological literature around gifted and talented adolescents in that it supports the view of Dai (2010), who states that “on both philosophical and psychosocial grounds, protecting and enhancing students’ sense of personal agency is a moral imperative of any education system” (p. 191). This type of social science research allows those voices of personal agency to be heard.

The phenomenological approach can be challenging and time-consuming for a researcher and I found that this was so for my research at times. Analysis is around substantial excerpts from the participants’ narratives (Reid et al., 2005) and at times I felt like I was drowning in transcripts and quotes. Everything the participants had said seemed to me to be relevant to the lived experiences of these young people. I was constantly aware of my responsibility as an interpreter of the stories as they were told to me, and of how I was going to represent the essence of their understandings.

However, I believe the effort and time put into remaining true to the phenomenological approach was worthwhile as the methodology enabled the rich description of what it is really like experiencing school as gifted and talented learners for one group of adolescents in New Zealand schools, to emerge from the findings.

Despite endeavouring to represent the understandings of the participants as faithfully as I possibly could in the findings to this study and to uphold the mantra that it is they who are the experts, it is understood that any representation of the participants' ideas is always filtered through my interpretation as a researcher. This is inevitably a limitation for any interpretative research study. I have made extensive use of quotations from the participants in the Findings chapters of the thesis in order to clarify and justify any interpretations that I might make of the participants' understandings and experiences.

I am also cognisant of the limitations that exist because of the retrospective nature of this type of research. The young learners and their parents in particular are recalling some lived experiences that have been important to them, but not as they are actually living them, and therefore interpretations from these recollections are analysed through both their rememberings and through my lens as a researcher. Van Manen (1990), however, sees this retrospection as a strength of phenomenological research. He would support the conclusion that a more in-depth reflection from the participants was possible after the experience had been lived, rather than when they were actually experiencing a time in their schooling life. Thus, the deeper reflections that the participants were able to share with me in hindsight added to the thick description for this study.

A further difficulty with a method that involves interviewing young people, specifically, is the issue of whether or not they feel obligated to tell you, as the researcher, the kinds of things they believe you may wish to hear. It could be said there were some occasions when participants may have been reflecting the views of their parents or other significant adults, but one of my personal lessons from this study was that these were young people who thought deeply about their emerging beliefs, their values, their perceptions of the socio-cultural milieu of school as they experienced it and, as has been discussed before, who were developing their own sense of personal agency. They may have been reflecting responses based around

societal norms but I did get the sense that these were based on their own observations and not because they felt it was an answer that I expected.

Further, although the participants appeared to be open and to be willing to share their personal experiences with me, I was cognisant of the fact that they could negotiate for themselves what they wished to share. There will be aspects of their experiences that I was not privy to because they chose not to talk about these with me. However, the design of the study allowed for a relationship to develop between myself and the participants over an 18 month period. I believe this helped to strengthen the ease with which co-constructed conversations developed between the young students and me as I became more of a familiar figure to them over this time, rather than a 'professional' outsider. Thus, although there may have been times when some of the participants gave limited responses to questions that were put to them, this was more often than not the fault of the type of question that did not allow for elaboration.

I tried to focus on the phenomenological methodology and provide as rich a description as possible of what it is like to experience being in the world of school as a gifted and talented learner, but inevitably decisions had to be made to exclude some data from the thesis, which could have limited the richness of the findings. As a sole researcher, I needed to ensure manageability around the research and attempt to maintain a focus. This meant leaving out some data that could have provided different insights. For example, the data collected for the study included reflections from the students and parents around teacher pedagogy, such as what types of practices worked well for gifted and talented students and what was less successful in their view. Examples of school policies for gifted and talented students were analysed. Relationships between schools and homes were also explored as were the teachers' perceptions about gifted and talented education. There was not space within this thesis to discuss these findings. Further studies utilising these kinds of data for a different group of students may reveal more insights into the experiences of teaching and learning for gifted and talented learners.

Contributions to the field and further research

The strength of this study is that it has provided a rich description of the lived experiences of being gifted and talented, in the world of school, for a group of

adolescents in New Zealand. It has contributed to the existing literature on gifted and talented education by illuminating the voices of these students. It is by listening to these voices that educators may gain a better understanding of what it is like to be gifted and talented within the socio-cultural milieu of New Zealand schools. This study takes a personal focus which privileges the views of these adolescents, and those of their parents and the teachers; it is about what they think and what they have experienced. Other studies could take a more social focus by exploring how actions and behaviours are socially mediated through systems and structures.

A search of the literature found a paucity of empirical studies which alluded to the implicit understandings of New Zealand students about giftedness and talent (see Chapter Two). This study has endeavoured to bridge that gap by presenting the views of this group of adolescents and their parents. Further studies could explore the understandings of other groups of gifted and talented students in New Zealand to compare their implicit understandings of giftedness. For example, do students from differing cultural backgrounds hold different perceptions around the meaning of giftedness and talent? What impact does the socio-cultural milieu of the New Zealand school have on understandings for students who are experiencing schooling here in New Zealand, but may have conceptions that are grounded under a different socio-cultural background? An exploration of the implicit views around what giftedness and talent might mean to students from different ethnic backgrounds (for example, Asian or Pasifika), who are experiencing schooling in New Zealand, would be a suggested area for further learning. Asian students are strongly represented in achievement data from the New Zealand Qualification Authority (NZQA) statistics (NZQA, 2012) and by 2026 it has been estimated that 16% of the New Zealand population will be of Asian ethnicity (Bevan-Brown, 2012). What are the understandings that Asian students have about giftedness and talent? What is it like being gifted and talented and Asian in the socio-cultural milieu of New Zealand schools? How do Pasifika students view giftedness and talent within a New Zealand socio-cultural schooling framework?

Despite the popular literature representing societal stereotypes around parents of gifted and talented children (see Chapter Two), there does not appear to be any empirical literature that asks parents in New Zealand their implicit views on what giftedness might mean. This study adds to the literature by highlighting parental

implicit views as well as those of the students and debunks some of the cultural stereotypes around parents' understandings about achievement for their highly able children. A personal story from my own experience illustrates this cultural dilemma for parents. For several years I taught an evening Community Education course entitled "Parenting Your Gifted and Talented Child." Attendance ranged from 15 – 25 participants over the years. Each year I would ask the parents what they told their friends and their relatives about attending the course. Invariably, the course participants would admit that they either did not tell people about the course, or would say they were going to "an education course" or a "parenting course" or use another euphemism. Very few parents over the years admitted publicly that they were attending a course to help them parent their child who they thought might be gifted and, when asked why, the responses were couched around a fear of being accused of 'skiting'; of being seen as arrogant or boastful about their child.

The views of the parents in this research study reflected similar reservations about publicly advertising one's children's abilities, which is at odds with the somewhat clichéd notion represented in the popular literature that parents of gifted and talented children 'push' their offspring into the limelight. The parents from this study understood that although they, too, were parenting children of exceptionality, unlike parents of other exceptional children they were unlikely to be given societal support and understanding, but rather were susceptible to accusations of elitism and privilege within their cultural context (similar ideas were expressed by Silverman, 1993, in an American context) and thus constructions of giftedness were downplayed.

The study can be said to add further to the growing knowledge about gifted and talented education in New Zealand in that it presents the understandings that a group of gifted and talented students, their parents and teachers, have about the phenomena of achievement and underachievement, which have not been explored before in the empirical literature from within the context of schooling in New Zealand (see Chapter Two). In respect to underachievement, in particular, there have been numerous studies internationally discussing operational views of the concept, but few studies exploring what students themselves see underachievement for gifted and talented students to be about, or whether there is a disconnect between the views of students, parents and teachers. In addition, studies around the phenomena of achievement and

underachievement are frequently quantitative in nature (see Chapter Two). A qualitative, phenomenological study which asks the students themselves, and their parents and teachers, what they understand about these two phenomena provides an extension to the international literature as well as that in New Zealand.

In particular, the study has challenged the use of the theoretical notion of potential in relation to the phenomenon of underachievement for gifted and talented learners. Can we continue to define achievement or underachievement through standards of 'reaching potential' or 'not reaching potential' when it is clear that the concept of potential is an enigma to students, parents and educators?

Further research could be conducted around what achievement and underachievement might mean for gifted and talented students representing a more diverse population than the participant group for this study, specifically in terms of both ethnicity, as previously discussed, and socio-economic status. The participant group for this study all identified as being from one ethnic group (European New Zealanders). In terms of socio-economic status it would be difficult to claim that there was a large range among the participants. Peterson et al. (2009) observed that the gifted participants in their study who maintained high achievement, despite various negative life events, were "motivated, achievement-oriented and from middle to upper socioeconomic levels" (p. 44) a critique that could be levelled at the participants from this study. The middle-classness of the bright girls that Renold (2001) studied, and the expectations that accompanied this, was one reason given for their continued academic competency, even though the girls realised that they were positioned as unpopular among their peers. A more diverse sample for this research study, where participants did not have the same kind of family and socio-economic support, may have elicited different results in terms of maintaining high achievement aspirations.

In addition, it is acknowledged that this study was conducted using a small, racially homogeneous sample. Thus, along with exploring implicit theories about the concept of giftedness and talent, exploring the understandings about achievement and underachievement of gifted students from ethnic minority groups in New Zealand schools could also be seen as a useful pathway for further study. However, it should be emphasised in our continuing search for diversity that the beliefs of a Pakeha, middle class group of adolescents are as important and valuable as the beliefs of any

other group of young people. I suggest that while it could be posited that a group of students such as those from my study have come from positions of privilege, in terms of their cultural capital, my research shows that being gifted and talented in the world of school is still not always easy for them. Their voices deserve to be heard as they have valuable insights to share about the experiences of being gifted and talented adolescents, as do other students who come from different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. The focus on Pakeha students in this study is not to negate the experiences of other students, and this study provides possible points of comparison for future research. Further, there could be value in exploring the lived schooling experiences of a larger group of gifted and talented adolescents from a wider geographical area throughout New Zealand.

This study has added to an understanding of the importance of the development of identities for gifted and talented adolescents. The voices of these young people affirm the notion of Gross's (1989) forced choice dilemma for some gifted and talented adolescents. The Identity Profiles that have stemmed from the experiences of the participants for this study can help bring to light what it is like for some gifted and talented adolescents in New Zealand as they negotiate identities while being in the world of school. Listening to the voices of other gifted and talented students experiencing school in New Zealand would be an avenue for further research to determine whether similar identity profiles would emerge from such narratives.

A final insight

I have learned from the gifted and talented adolescents who took part in this study that as they choose their achievement pathways they value the support and guidance of families, friends and teachers who take the time to listen to their voices, and who try to understand the essences of what it is like to be gifted and talented in their world of school. Yet, as much as significant adults in their lives may consider themselves to be the 'experts,' it is the students who are experiencing 'being in the world of school' and thus, they who are the experts on their own experiences. I have been lucky enough to have been allowed to 'borrow' the experiences of 11 gifted and talented adolescents for the purposes of this thesis.

I began this study because of a personal link between life and research, as a phenomenological reflection that arose from ‘personal engagement,’ and as the parent of a gifted and talented child who experienced ‘being in the world of school’ in the socio-cultural milieu of New Zealand schools. Although my daughter is now in her twenties, I would like to give her young nine year old self the final word of this thesis. Despite several experiences of school that had been far from positive for her, her words are of belonging, of faith in a developing sense of self and identity, of aspiring towards continued achievement, of hope for her possible selves, and of trust in the support of those around her. They are words that I think April, Astrid, Autumn Ashes, Bruce Wayne, Hubert Cumberland, Kurt, Lewis, Marty, Mr Bubbles, Oliver Stone and Rambo would endorse.

I like to learn. But sometimes I feel I can never win. When I do well at things people are jealous and hate me and when I do badly people criticise me and laugh at me all the more. I’ve heard of people called Tall Poppies. These are poppies that are so tall and special that other poppies are jealous of them and want to cut them down to size. I don’t see why anyone should be jealous of me and sometimes I just want to be like everyone else but most of the time I’ve learnt to be happy with who I am. To all you kids out there, I hope you realise that you’re not the only ones being teased. Be proud of who you are and just keep on trying. Despite the people who are unkind the most important thing is to have faith in yourself and trust the people who love you. If you do, you will do well in this world.
(Olivia, aged 9)

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Appendix 1:

Skye Intermediate Identification Processes

At Skye Intermediate School there are three high ability classes (this is the school's term) for each year group. These classes have the same teacher for the two years spent at the intermediate. On enrolling at the school in Year 7, selected students are placed in a high ability class. The process for more formally identifying a student as gifted and talented at this school is more detailed and is explained below in an extract from a personal communication with the Gifted and Talented Coordinator at the school.

Question: Is it correct that Skye has three accelerate classes at each year level? And is this the correct term for the classes?

Answer: High ability classes. Three at each level currently. Some students of higher ability also opt into the enquiry classes for an alternative learning method although this approach is well used in the high ability classes also. Note that students are grouped separately, according to ability again, for Maths right across each year level.

Question: Are the students who are in those classes thus identified by the school as 'gifted and talented'?

Answer: No, the students in these classes are of higher ability, initially placed by a team led by the Principal, following our own school assessment and interviews with their previous school and parents where appropriate. All are not formally classified as G & T. The G & T are separately identified through assessment of various types, parent referral, external referral e.g. psychological, teacher nomination and extended through proper programming in these classes and special programmes e.g. FPS, high level Maths, music, etc ... The gifted in sport, leadership, culture etc are also identified and given opportunity for development
(GATE coordinator, Skye Intermediate, personal communication, May 23, 2010).

The following is from the **Skye Intermediate School Policy on Gifted and Talented**:

A range of objective and subjective measures will be used to identify gifted and talented students in many areas. These may include:

- Information gathered from previous schools
- School and class testing, standardised tests, varying types of assessment
- Psychological assessment
- Parent information
- Self-nomination
(Skye Intermediate School Board of Trustees, 2007)

Appendix 2:

Examples of Letters to Participants

A) Initial Letter to Parents

Dear Parents/Caregivers,

I would like to invite you to take part in a study about the experiences of able students in New Zealand schools. You are being asked to participate as the parent or caregiver of a student who has been identified as able by your child's school, by being placed in an extension class. I am carrying out this study for my PhD at the University of Canterbury.

The aim of this study is to find out what able students, and their parents and teachers, think about the learning experiences and social experiences for these students in our schools. For example, what kinds of learning activities work for able students and what do not work so well for them? How do they get on with their peers at school? How do these students feel about being 'smart'? What has school been like for them so far? I hope the study will add to our growing understanding of the experiences and needs of our able students and assist teachers to provide for them in New Zealand schools.

At this stage, I am interested in identifying and interviewing parents who might be happy for their child and themselves to participate in the study. The first step would involve an interview with you about your son's/daughter's experiences at school up until now, to find out what you as parents think. If you are interested and agree to participate in this initial interview there would be no obligation for you or your child to be involved further in the study if you did not wish it.

The initial interview would take about thirty minutes and will be completely confidential. Interviews can be arranged at a time to suit you and can be either at your home or at the school. Interviews will be audio-taped and then transcribed. You will have an opportunity to read the transcripts and to suggest any changes you wish.

Materials will be treated with respect and confidentiality. This means that the materials will only be seen by myself, and by my supervisors for this study, Associate Professor Alison Gilmore and Dr Jane Abbiss from the College of Education, University of Canterbury. You will have the right to withdraw from the interview at any time should you wish to do so, or to ask that any information you have given me not be included.

If you are happy to participate in an initial interview for the study, please sign the consent form attached and return it to me or to the class teacher if you prefer, by November 30th. I will then contact you to arrange a suitable interview time. Interviews can be conducted either towards the end of 2007 or in early 2008, whichever is more suitable.

Following on from the initial interviews, I would like to follow a small group of students over the next 12–18 months, as the next phase in my study. You and your child might be asked to participate in three or four further interviews over this time.

If you have any queries about the study please do not hesitate to contact me at [contact details].

You could also contact my supervisors; Associate Professor Alison Gilmore or Dr Jane Abbiss [contact details].

Thank you for considering this request.

Yours faithfully,

Louise Tapper
M.Ed (Dist), B.Ed, Dip.Tchg, L.T.C.L
School of Educational Studies and Human Development
College of Education
University of Canterbury

B) Letter to Selected Students

Dear [student's name]

My name is Louise Tapper and I am a student from the University of Canterbury.

I am doing a study for my PhD about the learning experiences and social experiences of able students in New Zealand schools. I would like to invite you to take part in this study. The kinds of things I want to know about are:

- What has school been like for you so far?
- What sorts of things hinder or help your learning?
- How do you feel about being called 'smart'?
- What does 'achievement' mean for you? Do you think you are achieving at school?

This study would be done over 12–18 months and would involve your participation as you move from intermediate to secondary school. I would like to interview you four times over this period. I would like to talk to your parents/caregivers and to some of your teachers over this time, and to look at things like your school reports and test results if you are happy with this.

If you would like to take part in the study, please complete the separate consent form and have your parent(s) sign it as well as yourself. This lets me know that you are both happy for you to participate in the study. If you think you may be interested in taking part in the study but would like to know more, you can contact me at [contact details] and we can arrange to talk more about the study.

If you do agree to take part in this study the identity of both you and your parents will remain confidential. No information that could possibly identify you or your parents or your school will be published in any reports based on this study. You and your parents will be asked to sign consent forms, which say that you are happy to participate. Also, you can still withdraw from the study at any time. I will be checking with you from time to time to make sure you are still happy to continue.

I am very interested in what you and other able students think, and I hope that the results of this study will help teachers and schools provide for able students in New Zealand so that school is a positive, exciting and successful experience.

Yours faithfully,

Louise Tapper

School of Educational Studies and Human Development

College of Education

University of Canterbury

C) Letter to High School Teachers

Dear [teacher's name],

I am currently engaged in doctoral studies at the University of Canterbury.

The aim of my study is to find out what gifted and talented students and their parents think about learning experiences and social experiences for these students in New Zealand schools. For example, what kinds of learning activities work for gifted and talented students and what doesn't work so well for them? How do they get on with their peers at school? How do these students feel about being 'smart'? What does 'achievement' mean to them? I hope the study will contribute to a growing understanding of the experiences and needs of gifted and talented students and assist teachers to provide for them in New Zealand schools.

This study is unique because most research has been done overseas and very little has looked at the actual views of the students and parents involved. I am endeavouring to address this gap. I am currently following a group of student participants who have been part of the study since Year 8. The project involves interviews with the student participants, their parents and teachers.

In order to better inform the study, I would like to interview teachers about the learning and social experiences of the students concerned. To this end, I am writing to ask you, as the teacher of a student participant [student name] if you would agree to participate in this project. [Student name] is happy for you to talk about him/her with me. This would involve a single 30 minute interview which could take place at school or at another venue that is convenient for you. The interview would be audio-taped, with your permission.

All information gathered will be treated with respect and confidentiality. No information that could in any way identify you, the students, the school or persons from the school will be included in any written reports of the project.

If you agree to participate in this study, would you please complete the Consent Form attached and return it to me at the address below. I would then contact you to arrange a suitable time for the interview.

If you would like further information about the study you can contact me on [contact details]. You may also contact either of my supervisors from the College of Education, University of Canterbury; Associate Professor Alison Gilmore or Dr Jane Abbiss [contact details].

Thank you for considering my request and I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Louise Tapper

M.Ed (Dist). B.Ed., DipTchg., L.T.C.L

School of Educational Studies and Human Development

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University of Canterbury

Appendix 3:

Examples of Consent Forms

A) Consent Form for Parents – Initial Interview.

Short title of Project: Experiences of Able Students in New Zealand Schools

Researcher: Louise Tapper

I agree to take part in an initial interview with Louise about the school experiences of my child.

I have read the information about this project and I understand that any information that I choose to share will be treated as confidential.

I understand that material gathered from the study may be used in articles or conference presentations but that no information that could identify the participants, the school, or people from the school, will be published in any written reports.

I understand that I may withdraw from the interview at any time and that I may request that any information I have provided also be withdrawn.

I understand that the interview will be audio-taped.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date:

Contact details: _____

B) Student Consent to Research Participation

Short Title of Project: Experiences of Able Students in New Zealand Schools.

Researcher: Louise Tapper

If you are willing to take part in this study please read this form and sign the appropriate section below.

- 1) I have read and understood the information about this study.
- 2) I have had a chance to talk to Louise about this study and have any questions answered.
- 3) I understand that my parent has also given permission for me to take part in the study.
- 4) I understand that if my parent does not wish to participate in the study then I will not be taking part either.
- 5) I understand that any information gathered will be kept confidential to Louise and her university supervisors. I understand that material gathered from the study may be used in articles or conference presentations but that no information that could identify me, or my parent or my school will be used in reports on this study.
- 6) I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary and that I can stop taking part at any time and have any information that I, or my parent, have given to Louise taken out of the final project.
- 7) I understand that Louise may wish to see my school reports and test results.
- 8) I understand that I will receive a summary of the research findings at the end of the study.

Name: _____ (student)

Signed: _____ (student)

Appendix 4:

Examples of Interview Schedules

A) Initial Parent Interview

Tell me how you would describe [child's name]?

What do you think are [child's name] special abilities?

What has school been like for her/him in the past?

Has he/she always achieved well at school or have there been times when things have not gone so well?

What has school been like for him/her at intermediate?

Would you say that he/she is doing as well at school as he/she can?

How do you think [child's name] will cope with the transition to high school?

How would you describe his/her relationships with other children?

B) Interview Questions for Students – Round 2

(Year 9 experiences)

How do you think your first year at high school went, overall?

Did you feel generally positive about the year or not so positive?

(General view of school)

How is school for you, at the moment?

What is good about the school?

What is not so good?

(Views about learning)

How has the academic learning been for you?

Have you had any particular successes you can tell me about?

Any times when things did not go so well that you can remember? Disappointments?

Would you say you are doing as well as you can with your schoolwork, at the moment?

Why or why not? How do you know?

Have there been other successes or disappointments for you at school that are not about academic learning?

(On being gifted and talented)

Has the school identified you as an able learner in any way?

Do you know where you are placed in relation to your peers at this school?

What kinds of expectations does the school have for you, do you think?

Do you see yourself as a capable/bright student? Why or why not?

How do you feel about the way teachers may treat you as a bright student? Can you give me some examples?

(Views on teaching practices)

What kinds of things do you think teachers can do to help you with your learning?

Can you give me a specific example of what a teacher who helps you learn best has done?

What kinds of things do teachers do that might hinder your learning?

Can you give me a specific example of something a teacher has done?

(On motivation)

What is it that makes you want to do well? Can you explain this?

Are there some things that might make you do less well than you can?

Are there some things that might make you do better than you can?

Are there some things that other people can do to help you do better? To do as well as you can? Who are those other people?

(Understandings about achievement)

I asked you this last time but I wonder if you might have some more thoughts.

What does 'achievement' mean to you?

What especially does a high achiever look like? What kinds of things does a high achiever do?

How do you know when a student is doing as well as they possibly can at school?

Can you give me an example of when you think you have achieved highly?

(Understandings about underachievement)

What does 'underachievement' mean to you?

What does an 'underachiever' look like?

What kinds of behaviours would you see? Can you give me some examples?

What about an able underachiever? Can gifted students underachieve too? What does a gifted underachiever do?

(School environment/philosophy)

What do you think about gifted and talented education in secondary schools?

Do you think it is important?

Do you know about gifted and talented education in your school?

What are some of the ways that gifted students are catered for in your school? Can you give me some examples?

(Relationships with peers)

How do you get along with your classmates at high school?

Do you find you have new friends?

Are you feeling mainly positive about your friendships at school or mainly negative?
Why?

C) Focus Group Questions for Students

(On being gifted and talented)

During the study, I've tended to talk to you about being 'highly able' but there are a number of terms that are used in the field. We use the term 'gifted and talented'; we also use the term 'smart.' You have been part of my research because you are smart, or gifted (and talented?)

What is it like in school for you, being smart?

What do you think being gifted and talented means?

Do you think your school does a good job catering for gifted and talented students? Or not?

Does your school tell you if you are gifted and talented? If you are in a top class?

What do you think about that?

(On achievement and underachievement)

During the study we have talked about achievement and underachievement.

What do you think it means to achieve highly? Can you give examples?

Is it important to achieve highly in everything one does?

What do you think it means to underachieve? Give me examples.

Do you think either of these – achieving highly and underachievement – are issues for kids like you?

Who would you be inclined to credit with achieving highly?

Who would you be inclined to blame if you were underachieving?

If you were not doing well at school, whose advice would you listen to – your parents, or your teachers, or your friends?

Do you think you as students think the same way about what achievement is as your parents do, or your teachers?

About what underachievement is?

If you were studying underachievement, what questions would you ask students?

(On motivation)

What sorts of things make you want to do well?

What prevents you from wanting to do well?

Do you think of yourselves as competitive? In what way?

How much of a part does your family play in your motivation to do well? Who, especially, in your family?

What do you think about goal setting? Do you think about the future much?

Has being part of this study made you think differently about anything?

D) Interview Questions for High School Teachers

Can you tell me how you would describe [student] generally?

Personality? How does he/she get on with peers?

Would you say he/she has any particular special abilities?

Learning or social? Sport, music, other?

How would you say [student's name] has coped with the move to secondary school?

Do you think there have been any difficulties/benefits with transition for him/her?

Any successes as far as you know?

Do you have any concerns about the student?

Can you say how he/she is doing in terms of his/her schoolwork?

Is he/she achieving well do you think?

Do you think he/she seems motivated to learn? Why?

What do you think might motivate him/her to learn well?

Do you know if there have been times this year when he/ she has not been doing as well he/she could? Why do you think this might have been?

How does communication between school and home work, at your school?

How well do you think the students' progress is reported to parents?

Have you personally had any communications with parents about [student's name]?

Has there been a need to do this?

What does 'achievement' mean to you?

What does a high achiever look like?

What kinds of behaviours would you expect to see?

How do you know when a student is achieving as well as they can at school?

What does 'underachievement' mean to you? What does an underachiever look like?

What sort of behaviours would you expect to see?

What about an able underachiever?

How would you identify an able underachiever? Can you describe a highly able student who you might call an underachiever?

What do you think teachers can do to help underachieving students?

What do you think about gifted and talented education? Is it important?

Do you know if the school has a policy on gifted and talented education?

Have you seen this policy?

Do you know some of the ways highly able students are identified and catered for here? Some of the programmes in place?

Do you know if/how an able student is identified as an underachiever at this school?

Appendix 5:

Reflection Sheet Template

Student's Monthly Reflection Sheet

Name –

Date –

What are some things that went well for you this month? Successes, achievements, examples of praise or positive feedback from others (teachers, parents, friends)?

What are some things that did not work well for you this month? Challenges, disappointments, examples of negative feedback or criticism from others?

Overall, do you feel positive or not so positive about your experiences in school this month?

Very positive

Very negative



1

2

3

4

5

Do you feel that you have done as well as you want to in your learning? Can you say why or why not?

Thanks!!!!

Appendix 6:

Ethical Approval

Human Ethics Committee

Secretary

Tel: +64 3 364 2241, Fax: +64 3 364 2856, Email: human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz



HEC Ref: 2007/19/CoE

30 October 2007

Ms Louise Tapper
School of Educational Studies & Human Development
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

Dear Louise

The College of Education Ethical Clearance Committee is pleased to inform you that your research proposal "Perceptions on Underachievement in Gifted and Talented Students" has been granted ethical approval at their meeting on 24 October 2007.

However, the Committee has noted that in several documents the paragraph regarding both confidentiality and anonymity has been omitted in some of the letters and consent forms. Please include this statement in all of these documents.

The Committee also ask that you include a statement saying that you may use the material you have gathered for publication (i.e. articles or conference presentations).

Should circumstances relevant to this current application change please note that you are required to reapply for ethical approval.

If you have any questions regarding this approval please let me know. We wish you well for your research.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J Greenwood'.

 Associate Professor Janinka Greenwood
Chair
Ethical Clearance Committee

"Please note that Ethical Approval and/or Clearance relates only to the ethical elements of the relationship between the researcher, research participants and other stakeholders. The granting of approval or clearance by the Ethical Clearance Committee should not be interpreted as comment on the methodology, legality, value or any other matters relating to this research."

University of Canterbury Private Bag 4800, Christchurch 8140, New Zealand, www.canterbury.ac.nz

Appendix 7:

Disclosure Debriefing Letter

The debriefing will be done orally and informally, face to face with the participants. A summary of what I might say to them as debriefing is outlined below.

Thank you for your contribution to this study. I really appreciate you taking part. Your thoughts and ideas have illuminated some very interesting issues around the social and learning experiences of gifted and talented students in New Zealand schools.

I have used the term ‘able’ students with you initially, as I did not want you to feel uncomfortable about the term ‘gifted and talented.’ I have found in my work that some people are not too keen on this term. You will have noticed that I changed to using ‘gifted and talented’ if I gauged that you were OK with this term in relation to yourself/in relation to the student. Because the Ministry of Education uses ‘gifted and talented’ and because this term is used in the literature, my written reports will talk about gifted and talented students. It has been interesting to hear your thoughts about what it means to be gifted and talented, and what you think about the use of the term.

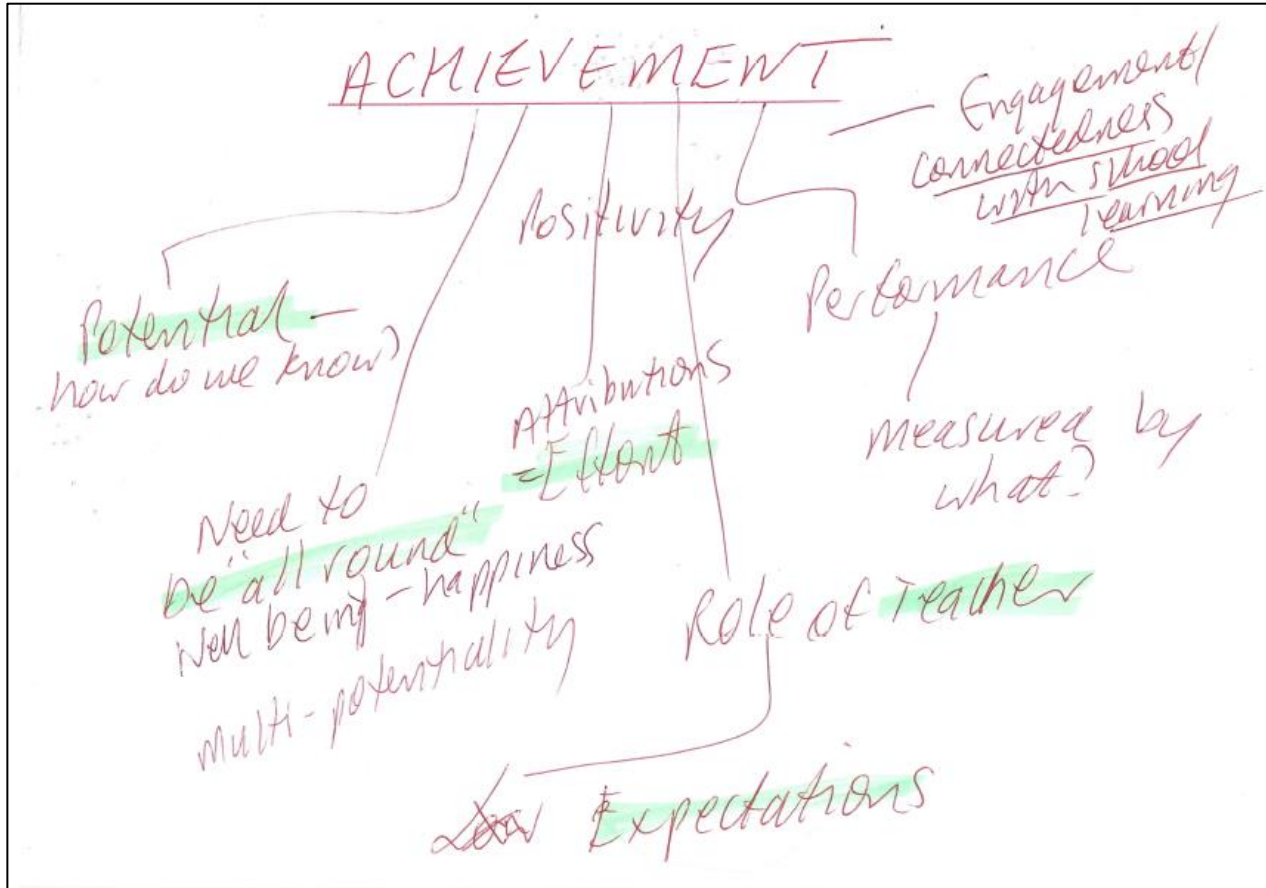
I have also been interested specifically in issues around the achievement and underachievement of gifted and talented students. I know I haven’t told you this before. I didn’t want to lead you to a particular definition or understanding about what achievement or underachievement means because I really wanted your ideas on this, not any that I may have, or that I could tell you about from the literature. So I have not specified to you the real focus of my research up until now. Much of my final study will be about perceptions on achievement and underachievement for gifted and talented students. What you have talked to me about has been really useful in helping me understand what achievement and underachievement means to our gifted students and to their parents and teachers.

Thank you again for your honest and informative comments throughout the study.

Appendix 8:

Example of a Mind Map

(From early stage of analysis)



Appendix 9:

Example of Free Nodes

Free Nodes

Name	Sources	Ref	Crea	C	Modif	Modified By
Avoiding conflict	1	1	18/0	C	3/11/	CLT
Behaviour at school	3	8	18/0	C	1/06/	CLT
Bored	2	3	3/10	C	3/11/	CLT
Bullying	4	11	15/1	C	18/1	CLT
Challenge or no challenge	3	7	22/0	C	18/1	CLT
Computer experts	2	2	3/10	C	3/11/	CLT
Conflict of interest	1	2	18/0	C	3/11/	CLT
Dealing with failure, frustration	3	6	18/0	C	3/11/	CLT
Family links to intelligence	1	1	18/0	C	3/11/	CLT
Feelings about being smart	3	10	1/10	C	19/1	CLT
Feelings about school	3	5	15/1	C	19/1	CLT
Gender references	2	2	15/1	C	3/11/	CLT
High standards	1	6	15/1	C	3/11/	CLT
Interests	4	20	18/0	C	30/0	CLT
Multi levelling or acceleration	1	2	24/1	C	24/1	CLT
Not interested	3	5	18/0	C	3/11/	CLT
Original thinker	2	7	3/10	C	3/11/	CLT
Parent view on school, teachers	3	28	3/10	C	30/0	CLT
Parent visits to school	2	7	21/1	C	18/1	CLT
Parenting style	3	14	1/10	C	30/0	CLT
Parents' knowledge of abilities	3	9	1/10	C	3/11/	CLT
Parents' education history	2	3	15/1	C	3/11/	CLT
Personality traits	3	9	21/1	C	18/1	CLT
Relationship with siblings	2	3	18/0	C	3/11/	CLT
Relationship with teachers	3	11	15/1	C	19/1	CLT
Risk taking	2	2	15/1	C	3/11/	CLT
School awards	2	2	3/10	C	18/1	CLT
School environment	1	5	3/10	C	3/11/	CLT
School reporting to parent	3	11	1/10	C	18/1	CLT
Schooling history	1	2	1/10	C	3/11/	CLT
Self esteem	1	1	31/1	C	18/1	CLT
Self-motivated	1	3	3/10	C	3/11/	CLT
Sense of humour	1	1	15/1	C	3/11/	CLT
Sensitivity	2	3	22/0	C	3/11/	CLT
Socialisation	2	7	21/1	C	19/1	CLT
Special abilities - academic	3	7	18/0	C	30/0	CLT
Special abilities - extra curricular	2	6	18/0	C	3/11/	CLT
Streamed classes	2	4	1/10	C	19/1	CLT
Streaming	3	11	3/10	C	18/1	CLT
Stress and worry	3	10	18/0	C	19/1	CLT
Stress for parents	1	1	15/1	C	3/11/	CLT
Teacher expectations	2	2	21/1	C	18/1	CLT
Tests	3	5	3/10	C	19/1	CLT
Thoughts about the future	1	1	24/1	C	30/0	CLT
Time management	3	6	12/0	C	18/1	CLT

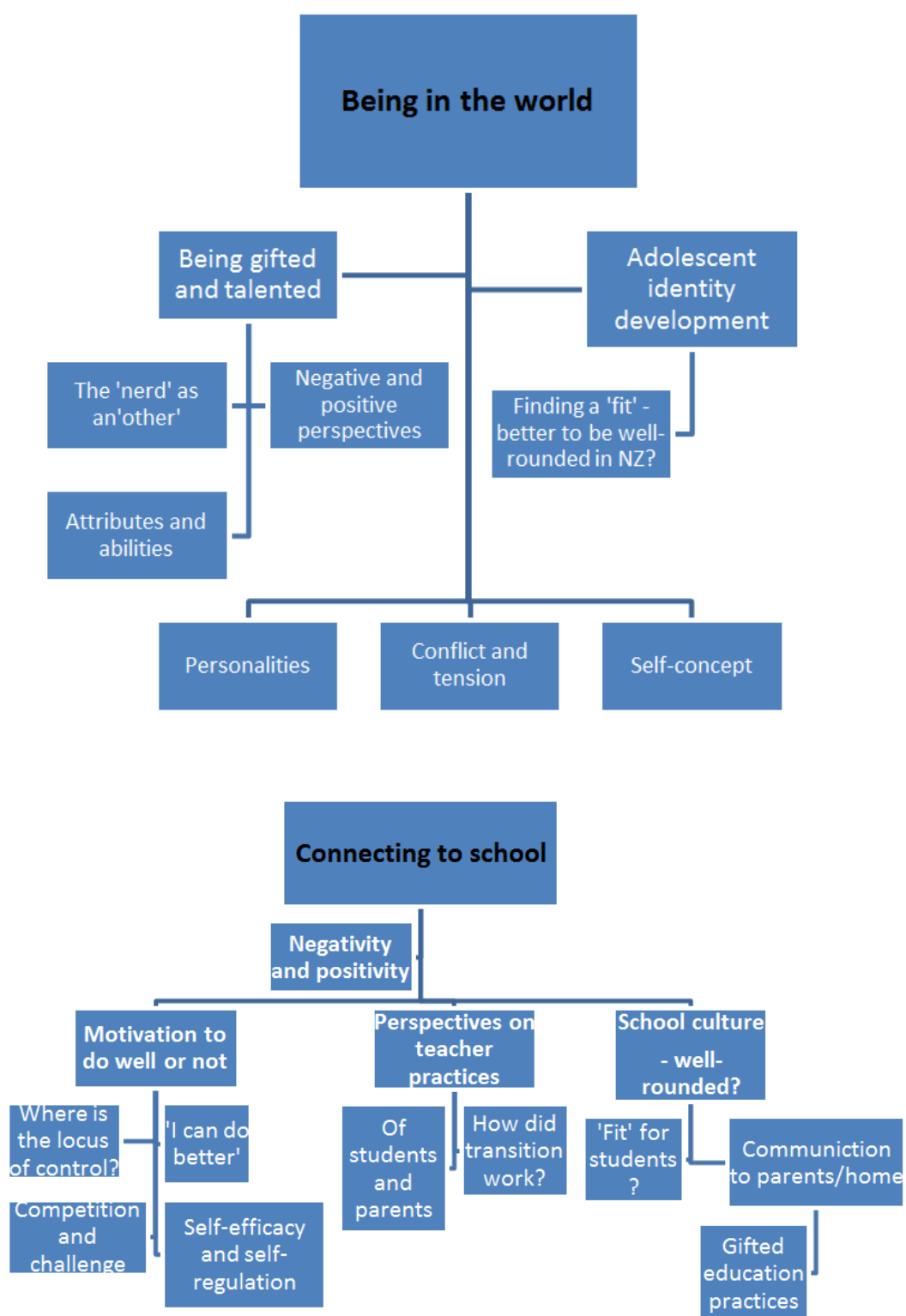
Appendix 10:

Example of Tree Nodes

Tree Nodes

Name	Sources	Re	Cre	C	Modi	Modified By
- Achievement	7	1	29/	C	3/12	CLT
All round achiever	12	1	21/	C	1/02	CLT
Parent perceptions about achievement	18	5	29/	C	9/11	CLT
+ Student understandings about achievement	22	7	8/0	C	9/12	CLT
Teachers' understandings about achievement	12	4	8/0	C	1/02	CLT
- Being in the World	2	5	28/	C	6/12	CLT
Identity development	19	5	3/0	C	3/07	CLT
On being gifted and talented	29	8	28/	C	2/07	CLT
- Connecting to School	4	0	8/0	C	5/07	CLT
Competition	18	2	21/	C	6/12	CLT
Goal Setting	15	2	20/	C	3/07	CLT
Motivation	20	4	3/0	C	5/07	CLT
Self-efficacy	3	3	21/	C	6/12	CLT
Task commitment	8	9	11/	C	10/1	CLT
- Expectations	13	2	8/0	C	11/0	CLT
Parents expectations of the school and teachers	4	4	8/0	C	21/1	CLT
Students' expectations of themselves	17	3	8/0	C	2/07	CLT
Teachers' expectations of gifted students	16	2	8/0	C	29/0	CLT
Reaching Potential	28	6	21/	C	6/08	CLT
- Relationships and Power	1	2	8/0	C	20/0	CLT
Parent and teacher relationships	9	1	8/0	C	13/0	CLT
Student and teachers	20	4	8/0	C	13/0	CLT
Students and families	8	1	11/	C	11/0	CLT
Students with peers	15	4	8/0	C	13/0	CLT
- School environment	11	3	8/0	C	10/1	CLT
+ Communication	5	9	3/0	C	8/11	CLT
Perspectives on teacher practices	18	4	28/	C	1/12	CLT
+ Transition	2	2	8/0	C	10/1	CLT
- Underachievement	7	1	31/	C	8/11	CLT
Parents' perceptions	21	7	11/	C	11/0	CLT
+ Students' understandings	12	2	11/	C	3/12	CLT
Teachers' understandings	7	1	11/	C	1/02	CLT

Appendix 11: Thematic Maps



Appendix 12:

Tables of Significant Statements – Textural Description

Meaning Units – Parents’ Understandings about Achievement

<u>Theme –Doing your best</u>	
Significant statement	Properties
“Reach their potential, would be my answer. I think everybody can achieve. I think it’s about setting realistic goals and meeting them. I – at realistic, at your potential, I think that, yeah, that’s my achievement”.	If you work to the best of your ability, you will be achieving. Assumes know what ‘best of ability’ is. Conundrum – what is potential?
“ Um, what I have always said to Bruce Wayne is if at the end of the day you can say to yourself, I did my very best and I achieved to the best of my ability , then I am happy.” “I mean we have high expectations of them to do their best with their ability basically.” “I always say to my children that all I want them to do is to achieve to the best of their ability .”	It is achievement if you are the best you can be, even if it is not being top. Best you can with ability given you? Is this the same for students at all levels of ability?
“...you strive to do your best , you know, that’s the most important thing, whether it’s in a test and you get 70, or 80 or 60, if you have strived to do your best then that person, that’s their achievement.”	
“Deanna thinks achievement is attaining a really really really good mark. Achievement to her isn’t passing, it’s getting extremely good marks and doing really well. She doesn’t even want to be top of the class, she just wants to personally do well.”	About marks – academic focus? Parent view about what student thinks.
“I don’t know what his potential is, no, but he is working way beyond what I would ever, um expect.... It does scare me a wee bit, actually, what he’ll end up doing.”	Achieving above his potential – beyond therefore high achievement. (Reaching potential theme?)

<u>Theme – Achievement is ‘all round’</u>	
Significant statement	Properties
<p>“ And it’s not just aca demic either; it’s social and emotional areas, getting on with people, relationships...all sorts of areas”. “...but some parents can only see achievement as an aca demic achievement whereas the child might be very able, gifted, physically and would be a wonderful PE person or something along those lines.” “Yeah, there’s more to life I think than just receiving high marks when you sit a test.”</p>	<p>Achievement not just academic – parent hope and cultural expectation and school environment equals an ‘all round’ achiever is more valued. Not just about academics – achieve in other areas too such as co-curricular. Aca demics important but coupled with social/all round. Balance.</p>
<p>“Well, it needs to be the whole person, doesn’t it? Because I think, you know, um... achievement has to be tied up with being happy too and trying to have a whole life...” “I don’t need him to be getting 100 out of 100 every time for me to be happy and for him to be happy” “for Lewis, part of him being happy will be that he’s intellectually satisfied.... Lewis won’t be happy if he’s washing cars for the rest of his life.”</p>	<p>Achievement and happiness – being a good citizen? Well-being. “I am not a pushy parent – just want him to be happy”. Negating the myth of parents pushing able kids? But realistic view that happiness will be tied up with achievement? Parent view? Related to ‘middle classness’? Explore in thematic analysis chapter.</p>
<p>“...and he can be socially aware and relate well to people and he seems to be well rounded in those areas ... I’m much happier about that, I think that will give him a far more stable life later on than if you are socially uncomfortable.” “...to achieve at high school then I’d say he, my idea is that he’s well-rounded.”</p>	<p>Fit? Will fit in more if well rounded – social acceptance important. Parental view that life will be easier for child if well-rounded. Does this mean they think not easy if only aca demic? Themes.</p>

Appendix 13:

Tables of Significant Statements – Structural Description

FITTING IN - "THE NERD"	
Significant statements	Properties
<p>Yes, sometimes they call you a nerd, which is quite weird. (Lewis)</p> <p>Um, and, of course, from then on, you know, they used to just call her "the walking dictionary" and, you know, "you're a nerd" and all those sorts of things. Even at sort of eight / nine. (P)</p> <p>and he didn't want to get that name, a nerdy name. That's what he was concerned about. (A)</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">He said, they said, I said, why, why are they nerds? And he goes, well, they sit in at morning tea time and play their calculators. And I said, well, you know, that's just what they're into. (A)</p> <p>He's in a nerds class now, he told us, even though he talks about, you know, I'm in the nerd's class, the nerds, and, and possibly is a little bit embarrassed about seeing himself as a nerd –</p> <p>Participant: No, no, he hasn't been bullied for being smart. I think, they've ribbed him. Called him "nerd" and, you know, they'll go "nerd alert", "nerd alert" but he'd just laugh. (A)</p> <p>And I think if someone does call her a nerd these days, she's able just to laugh it off, because she knows in the fullock [7.08] whatever that word actually means, that she's not, because you know she has a lovely group of friends and they're all quite academic achieving and that as well. (J)</p>	<p>Discourses are constructed by others for gifted students – has an impact on construction of gifted students' identities and on achievement??</p> <p>Discomfort with being seen as 'nerd'. See article on bullying for males in Australian schools. (Monceaux and Jewell)</p> <p>Coping mechanisms - Laughs it off – but not seen as cool to be in 'nerd's class'. As per Kurt not needing to see councillor – some things you do not admit to, to protect male adolescent hegemony??</p> <p>As one finds own group of friends – 'the fit' – can feel more comfortable in laughing off teasing?</p>
<p>Um, some of them, like, if he did really well, like when he got the high distinction in Science and stuff, he said all his friends were sort of saying, "well you geek" and he wears glasses, so they said "geeky four eyes", you know "you think you, you know it all" or something like that. And he said oh you know, but then he'd say, "oh you know, it doesn't really matter." But [laughs]</p>	<p>How you cope with being teased for being smart – laugh it off, pretend you don't care – protect image.</p> <p>Does this encourage achievement in future??</p> <p>How does this affect desire to do well?</p>

<p>you know, it would. (M)</p>	
<p>Like the class lower than us is like, they don't really like us that much cos we get the opportunities that they don't really get. So [laughs] but other people like sort of respect us, but then say like "the nerdy class" even though it's not necessarily a negative thing, they're just sort of putting us in a box saying, "Oh she's really really smart" you know. (April)</p> <p>Yeah and there's also a stereotype on people that are smart. Like there's that name of like being nerdy and like at the movies it shows like nerds with like you know glasses and <u>high</u> riding and all that sort of thing. You know, so I reckon there's a stereotype which people follow because of [missed 5.55] things. (Hubert)</p> <p>Um I think people that are quite quiet and don't seem to have like the the biggest group of friends, and the biggest group of friends that think that they are the popular ones are the ones that get let down by the popular ones. And it's gen-, like I'm not trying to be racist, but like Asians generally get called nerds because they're not the most out-, like people think that they're not the most outgoing as people and they're not the sportiest people but really if you got to know one of them, like I've got an Asian friend and she's not really smart and if you got, like if you got to know one of them, then you might not think of them as just like an outcast nerd. (Hubert)</p>	<p>Understand that 'nerd' - not always seen as negative</p> <p>Stereotype upon stereotype – nerds are smart, they don't have friends and they are often Asian – the views that are out there amongst our adolescents – honest thoughts from Hubert C?</p>
<p>and what Bruce appeared to indicate is that he is seen as being in a brighter class, in a top-band class, so therefore that's the nerds. Um he himself said no, A is nerdier [laughs] than we are. And so yes it's a derogatory term isn't it. Does he see himself as a nerd? Um I don't think anybody has ever called him a nerd, possibly because he's um one of those people who seems to be an all-rounder. Um he does the sporty thing and sports boys are jocks and golly, aren't they this that and the other thing. So I don't think Bruce on a one-to-one, being on the receiving end, I don't think he's been there. (K)</p>	<p>Nerd label unlikely if you are sporty or well rounded</p>